ROAD TO QATAR 2022: UEFA QUALIFIERS

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

World Soccer

GLOBAL FOOTBALL SINCE 1960

April 2021

£5.99

www.worldsoccer.com

KELSEYmedia

FACE TO FACE

VARANE & FELIX

Countdown to the Euros continues

HEADLINERS

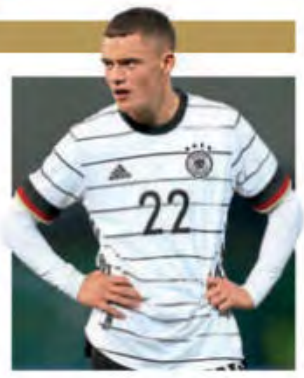
PATSON DAKA

Zambian goal king making waves

TALENT SCOUT

UNDER-21 EUROS

Players to watch



PLUS

- GIORGOS GIAKOUMAKIS
- BRAZILIAN CHAMPIONSHIP
- SHEBELIEVES CUP REVIEW
- CARIBBEAN, SINGAPORE, ESTONIA & TURKEY

ZLATAN & SUAREZ

TIME WAITS FOR ~~NO MAN~~ SOME MEN

The evergreen duo defying conventional football wisdom

SOCCER BOOKS

EST. 1982

FOOTBALL BOOK SPECIALISTS • www.soccer-books.co.uk

YEARBOOK OF EUROPEAN FOOTBALL 2020-2021

Our Yearbook of European Football, published as a replacement for the defunct *European Football Yearbook* covers domestic and international football during the 2019/2020 season. Includes full line-ups and statistics for international matches played by all 55 UEFA member countries with basic info (name, date of birth and club) for those who played in these games. For domestic football it contains an historical list of champions and top scorers for each country, results of top division games and a final league table for the past season, information about each National Cup Final, player listings for top division clubs (with appearances and substitute appearances) plus some other statistics. Also includes full statistics for the Champions League and Europa League 2019/2020.

Softback Price £39.95 ***Postage Rate 'G'***

THE FOOTBALL YEARBOOK 2020-2021

Formerly the *Rothmans Football Yearbook* and *Sky Sports Football Yearbook*, the 51st edition of this bestselling title contains over 1,000 pages packed with statistical information about British football during the 2019/2020 season.

Softback Price £25.00 • Hardback Price £45.00

Postage Rate of each edition is 'D'

NON-LEAGUE CLUB DIRECTORY 2020/21

The 43rd edition of this English Non-League football 'bible' is endorsed by the Football Association and is packed with information about more than 600 clubs in steps 1 to 6 of the English non-league football pyramid.

Softback Price £24.99 ***Postage Rate 'D'***

THE COMPLETE BELGIUM FC 1904-2020

A complete match-by-match statistical record of every game played by the Belgian national team from their very first match in 1904 through to the end of 2020. Includes full line-ups for both teams, scores, scorers, attendance and venue.

Softback Price £19.50 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

THE COMPLETE ITALY FC 1898-2020

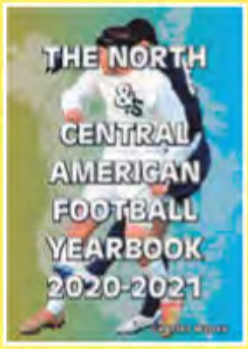
A complete match-by-match statistical record of every game played by the Italian national team from their first match in 1898 to the end of 2020. Includes full line-ups for both teams, scores, scorers, attendance and venue.

Softback Price £19.50 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

THE COMPLETE NETHERLANDS FC 1905-2020

A complete match-by-match statistical record of every game played by the Dutch national team from their first match in 1905 to the end of 2020. Includes full line-ups for both teams, scores, scorers, attendance and venue.

Softback Price £19.50 ***Postage Rate 'C'***



THE SOUTH AMERICAN FOOTBALL YEARBOOK 2020-2021

A 555-page statistical yearbook about South American football during the 2019-2020 season. Includes full line-ups and statistics for international matches, a historical list of domestic champions for each country, results of every League game, a final League table for the past season, National Cup Final info and player listings for the top division. Includes full statistics for the Copa Libertadores 2019 and Copa Sudamericana 2019.

Softback Price £36.50 ***Postage Rate 'D'***

THE NORTH & CENTRAL AMERICAN FOOTBALL YEARBOOK 2020-2021

A 499-page statistical yearbook about football in North & Central America plus the Caribbean during the 2019-2020 season. Includes full line-ups and statistics for international matches and a historical list of domestic champions in each country, a final League table for the past season, National Cup Final information and top division player listings.

Softback Price £36.50 ***Postage Rate 'D'***

THE ASIAN FOOTBALL YEARBOOK 2020-2021

A 605-page yearbook of domestic and international football in Asia during the 2019-2020 season. Includes full line-ups and statistics for international matches played by the 47 Asian countries plus basic information for those who played. For domestic football, this book contains a historical list of champions for each country, a final League table for the past season and information about each National Cup Final. Further details are included about the leading clubs in some of the larger countries as are full line-ups and statistics for the AFC Champions League 2019 and AFC Cup 2019.

Softback Price £36.50 ***Postage Rate 'D'***

FOREIGN LANGUAGE SEASON PREVIEW MAGAZINES

KICKER SONDERHEFT BUNDESLIGA 2020/2021 (GERMANY SEASON PREVIEW)

A German-language, magazine-style preview of the 2020/21 season in the German Bundesliga. Well-illustrated in full-colour with full-page team photos for the top two divisions plus smaller team photos for clubs in the 3.Liga. Includes player info and photos for the top division clubs.

Softback Price £14.99 ***Postage Rate 'C'***

GUERIN SPORTIVO CALCIO ITALY 2020-2021 (ITALY SEASON PREVIEW)

An Italian-language magazine preview of the 2020/2021 season in Serie A and Serie B. Contains player statistics and individual player photos for Serie A teams plus less detailed Serie B info.

Softback Price £14.99 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

FOOT MAGAZINE SPECIAL COMPETITION 2020-2021 (BELGIUM SEASON PREVIEW)

A French-language, magazine-style preview of the 2020-2021 season in the Belgian League. Well-illustrated with team photos covering a two-page spread plus player photos and information.

Softback Price £12.99 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

CADERNOS DE A BOLA FUTEBOL 2020/2021 (PORTUGAL SEASON PREVIEW)

A Portuguese-language, magazine-style preview of the 2020/2021 season in the Portuguese League. Well-illustrated in full-colour with team photographs plus player photos and statistics.

Softback Price £13.99 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

VOETBAL INTERNATIONAL SEIZOENGIDS 2020-2021 (NETHERLANDS SEASON PREVIEW)

A Dutch-language, magazine preview of the 2020/21 season in the Dutch League. Well-illustrated in full-colour with player photos & stats for the top division and player info for 2nd division clubs

Softback Price £17.99 ***Postage Rate 'C'***

BUNDESLIGA JOURNAL 2020 (AUSTRIA SEASON PREVIEW)

A German-language, well-illustrated, full-colour magazine-style preview of the 2020/2021 season in the top division of Austrian football. Includes team photographs and player information.

Softback Price £12.99 ***Postage Rate 'B'***

10% DISCOUNT ON ORDERS OVER £60

ORDERING INFORMATION

SURFACE DELIVERY – UK 2-5 days • Europe 1-3 weeks

AIRMAIL – Europe 3-14 days • Rest of World 2-4 weeks (COVID delays possible)

PAYMENT We accept: Major Credit Cards £ Sterling Cheques, Money Orders, Postal Orders, Debit Cards or Cash • Euro (€) Banknotes • Paypal to – order@soccer-books.co.uk

Postage Rate	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
UK Postage	£1.95	£2.50	£3.50	£4.50	£6.50	£6.50	£7.00
Europe Surface	£4.00	£6.00	£8.00	£12.50	£16.00	£16.00	£16.00
Europe Airmail	£4.50	£6.50	£8.50	£13.50	£17.00	£17.00	£17.00
Rest of World Air	£6.00	£8.00	£12.00	£14.50	£17.00	£24.00	£27.50
USA Airmail	£8.00	£11.00	£15.00	£17.50	£21.00	£25.00	£28.50
Maximum UK Postage £8.00 per order							

ORDER FORM

TITLES	PRICE £	PRICE p	POST £	POST p

FROM:

COST		
ORDERS OVER £60 LESS 10%		
SUBTOTAL		
+POST		
TOTAL		

Send to:

SOCCER BOOKS LTD. (WORLD SOCCER),
72 ST. PETERS AVENUE,
CLEETHORPES,
DN35 8HU. ENGLAND

Tel: (01472) 696226

Or e-mail:
info@soccer-books.co.uk

Please make cheques payable to Soccer Books Limited

I enclose a cheque, cash or British Postal Order for the amount shown

I wish to pay by Credit/Debit Card ☐ Expiry date .....

Security code – last 3 digits on signature strip (or 4 digits printed on front of Amex cards)

CARD NUMBER:

10% DISCOUNT **On orders over £60** (excluding postage)

www.soccer-books.co.uk

WorldSoccer
Global football intelligence since 1960

Contents

FEATURES

32 EyeWitness
Jean-Marc Guillou Academy

52 Talent Scout
Stars to watch at the Under-21 Euros

60 Face to face
Raphael Varane interview

THE WORLD THIS MONTH
People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 In pictures
10 From the Editor
13 **Jim Holden** The Messi question
14 **Keir Radnedge** 2026 World Cup venues
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Manchester City rejuvenation
18 **Ins & Outs** People on the move
20 ESM XI

HEADLINERS
22 Rangers & Celtic
23 Patson Daka
24 Fikayo Tomori
25 CSKA Sofia
26 Giorgos Giakoumakis
27 Fabio Cannavaro

EYEWITNESS
28 Brazil
36 Germany
40 Estonia

SPECIAL FEATURE
44 Luis Suarez & Zlatan Ibrahimovic

6 OF THE BEST
56 MLS talking points

FACE TO FACE
58 Luis Goncalves
64 Joao Felix
68 Stephen Bradley

SPECIAL REPORT
72 Fake agents
76 i-BrainTechnology

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
80 SheBelieves Cup

Follow World Soccer online
FOOTBALL 24-7

Follow @worldsoccermag Like World Soccer Magazine

SAVE MONEY ON WorldSoccer
Exclusive subscription offer
See page 8

World Service
Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

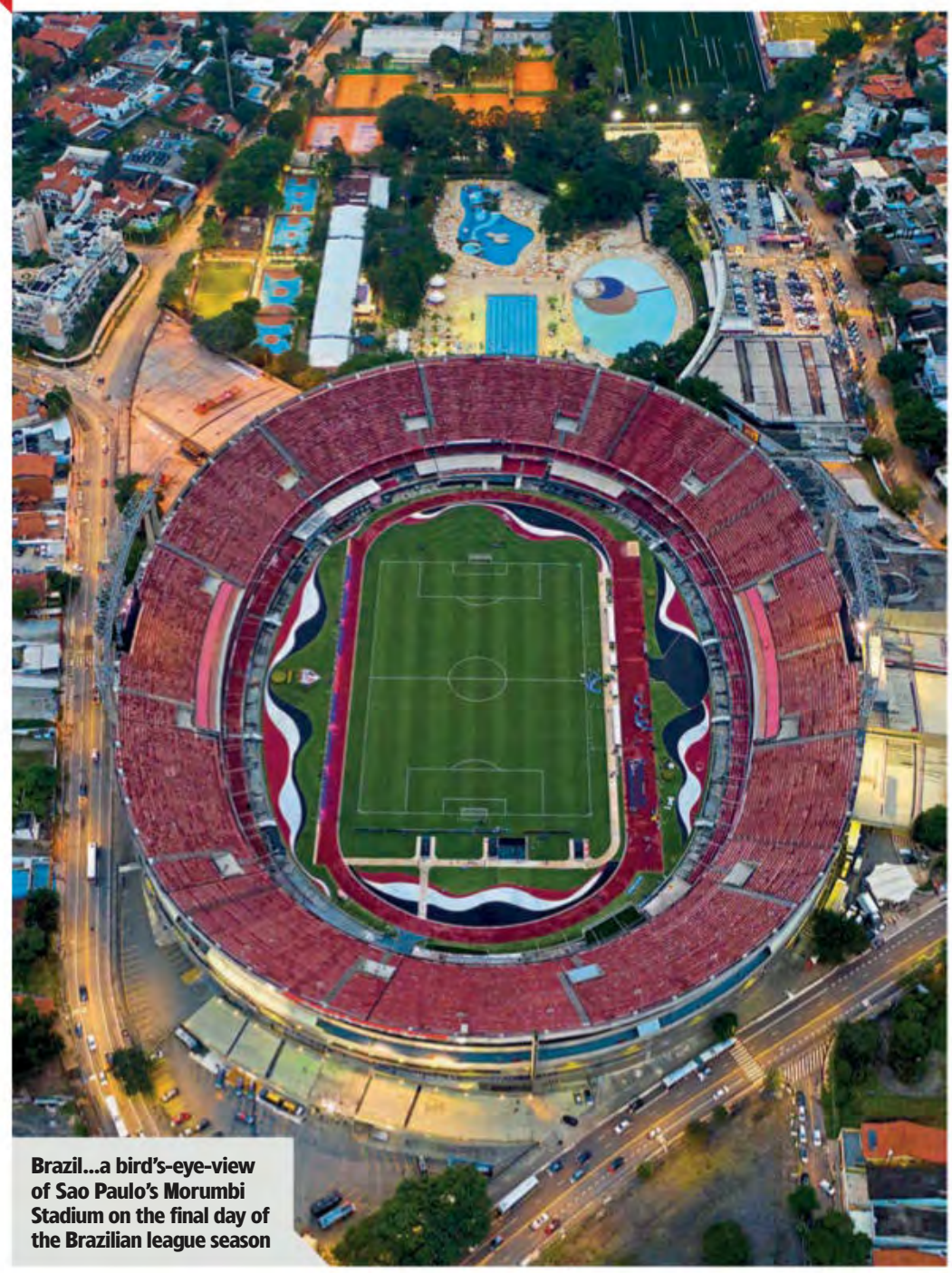
84 2022 World Cup qualifiers Europe section
87 Basque Country Freedom fighters
88 Caribbean CONCACAF World Cup qualifiers
90 Africa African Nations Championship review
92 Singapore Lion City Sailors
94 Turkey Decline of Eskisehirspor

PLUS
86 The month in numbers
88 Global diary
96 Results, tables, fixtures
97 2022 World Cup qualifying fixtures
98 Stadiums

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

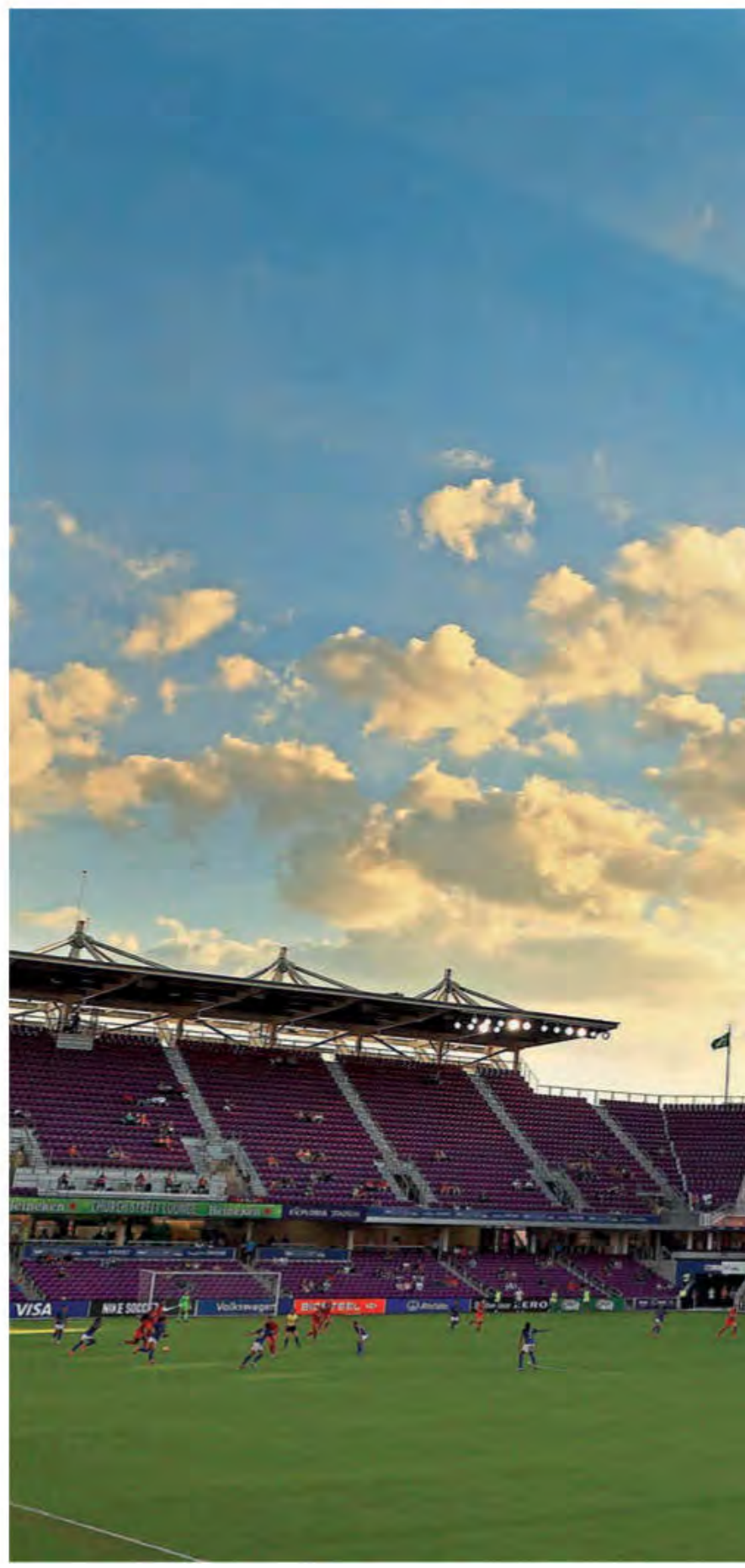
DR Congo...the Terrain Saint Robert, a football pitch in the capital Kinshasa



Brazil...a bird's-eye-view of Sao Paulo's Morumbi Stadium on the final day of the Brazilian league season

Spain...changing of the guard: PSG's 4-1 win at the Nou Camp sees Kylian Mbappe upstage Leo Messi in the Champions League

Myanmar...Premier League fans in the Southeast Asian country unite to protest against the military coup



Italy...a mural outside the San Siro capturing the clash between Romelu Lukaku and Zlatan Ibrahimovic in this season's Milan derby

England...pitchside at Anfield as Everton record their first away win over arch-rivals Liverpool since 1999

USA...the sun goes down over the Exploria Stadium in Orlando during the SheBelieves Cup game between Canada and Brazil

STAY INFORMED STAY INSPIRED.

6 ISSUES FOR £15

Try a subscription with our spring sale offer

Don't miss this special Spring Sale offer

Pay just **£15** for your first six issues of *World Soccer*

Continue to **save 25%** after your trial – save on newsagent prices!

Never miss an issue with FREE UK delivery direct to your door

Save 58%

GET WORLD SOCCER DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR!

PAY £15 FOR YOUR FIRST 6 ISSUES*

Subscribe online now shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC421 or call 01959 543 747 quote code WSC421

Calls charged at your standard network rate. Lines are open 8am-5.30pm Monday to Friday.

*Terms and conditions: Offer available for UK Direct Debit customers only. You will pay £15 for your first 6 issues. Your subscription will then continue every 6 months at the rate of £26.99 – still saving 25%. For overseas rates please visit shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC. Offer closes April 30, 2021. Full UK subscription rate for 13 issues is £77.87, USA & EU £91, RoW £98. Here at Kelsey Publishing we take your privacy seriously and will only use your personal information to administer your account and to provide the products and services you have requested from us. We will only contact you about our special offers via the preferences you have indicated, and you can update these at any time by emailing us at cs@kelsey.co.uk or by calling us on 01959 543 747.

FROM THE EDITOR

There has been much talk recently about an ushering in of a new era, with rising stars Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland set to replace Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as the new megastars of the game. This may become true over time, and both have already made a major mark to show that this is more than a distinct possibility – not least Mbappe, who already has a World Cup in his trophy cabinet and upstaged Messi with a Champions League hat-trick when they met at the Nou Camp recently. That being said, Leo and Cristiano are far from finished, and you only need to look at further examples of footballers in their thirties who are continuing to make such a big impact to see that there could be plenty of years left in the tank for the eternal rivals.

This issue we focus on two such examples, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Luis Suarez (page 44), as the veteran strikers lead their respective clubs Milan and Atletico Madrid to unlikely title challenges. Both are well into their thirties – Zlatan will in fact turn 40 this year – but they're proving that age is just a number and that they can more than match their contemporaries.

Ibrahimovic and Suarez are proving that age is just a number and that they can more than match their contemporaries

This contrast between older, proven players and young pretenders is highlighted in this issue by Nick Bidwell shining the spotlight on the talents you need to watch at the Under-21 Euros (page 52), Ben Bocsak focusing on the youth products coming through Africa's much-lauded Jean-Marc Guillou Academy (page 32) and our interview with Joao Felix (page 64) who, at just 21 years old, has also been earmarked as the "next Ronaldo".

We also talk to Raphael Varane (page 60) as the countdown to this summer's Euros continues, and Shamrock Rovers manager Stephen Bradley (page 68) ahead of the League of Ireland kick-off, but those aren't the only competitions in focus this month. Tim Vickery reviews the Brazilian league championship (page 28), Mark Gleeson looks back at the African Nations Championship (page 90) and Glenn Moore gives his verdict on the SheBelieves Cup (page 80), while we preview the 2022 World Cup qualification campaign which gets underway in Europe imminently (page 84).

With news and features reaching far and wide across the globe – from Zambian Patson Daka scoring goals for fun in Austria (page 23) to Estonian club FC Flora's unique football philosophy (page 40), Eredivisie's shock Greek goal machine Giorgos Giakoumakis (page 26) to Singapore's new super club (page 92), and special reports on fake agents (page 72) and i-BrainTech (page 76), there's plenty to digest this month.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

UEFA

UEFA sticking to Euro 2020 plans

UEFA have insisted that they have no intention of changing their plans for this summer's European Championship, in spite of reports emerging suggesting a deviation from the intended 12-city tournament.

In February, the president of the Albanian FA, Armand Duka claimed: "It's possible that Euro 2020 will be played solely in England," and a few weeks later a report by the *Associated Press* claimed that UEFA could strip hosting away from certain venues if they were unable to guarantee a certain attendance. Under current COVID restrictions, that would put Bilbao, Dublin and Glasgow at risk in terms of hosting matches.

Following both reports, UEFA were quick to insist: "No other plans are being pursued," but speculation is likely to continue over the coming weeks.

CHINA

Decline of Jiangsu could spell trouble for Inter

Just three months after being crowned Chinese champions, Jiangsu FC have

"The fact that corruption, modern slavery and a high number of dead workers are the basis of the most important thing we have, the World Cup, is not at all acceptable"

Tromso lead Norwegian clubs in calling for a boycott of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar

Full steam ahead... Euro 2020

"ceased operations" and will no longer compete in the CSL. In a statement, club owners Suning – who also own Internazionale – said: "Even though we are reluctant to part with the players who have won us the highest honours, and fans who have shared solidarity with the club, we have to regretfully make an announcement. From today, Jiangsu Football Club ceases the operation of its teams."

The move has cast the future of Chinese football into doubt, coming less than a year after Tianjin Tianhai also went out of business.

Where this leaves Inter is also unclear. Suning have been pursuing investment opportunities for the Italian giants, having recently parted company with long-term shirt sponsors Pirelli, ending a 27-year partnership. The club's return to the top of Serie A should make a lucrative replacement relatively easy to find, although time is of the essence: *Corriere dello Sport* recently reported that Inter had missed a payment to Manchester United for Romelu Lukaku.

Closed...Jiangsu's training ground

HEROES & VILLAINS

Takeover...Kyril Louis-Dreyfus

KYRIL LOUIS-DREYFUS

English football's youngest-ever chairman at the age of 23, Louis-Dreyfus, son of Russian-born Swiss billionaire Margarita Louis-Dreyfus, took charge of Sunderland in February. The Black Cats, one of the biggest clubs outside England's top tier, were also handed another boost with the news that the salary cap for Leagues One and Two would be scrapped.

RHYAN GRANT

The Sydney FC defender had become one of the A-League's most distinctive sights due to his flowing mullet. That is until he shaved it off as part of the World's Greatest Shave, raising over AUS$20,000. Plenty of his fellow players in the league chipped in, including Dylan Wenzel-Halls, the Brisbane Roar striker who notably tugged on Grant's hair in a past clash.

WIDZEW LODZ FANS

Having gone out of business in 2015, the Polish club have rebuilt, gaining promotion back up to the second tier thanks in large part to their fans. The four-time national champions, who knocked Liverpool out of the 1983 European Cup, recently sold out of season tickets for the rest of the campaign, despite the fact that fans are not yet allowed in stadiums due to COVID.

MICHAEL DOYLE

Notts County feared the worst during their recent National League clash with Dagenham & Redbridge, when goalkeeper Sam Slocombe was shown an 18th-minute red card. With no back-up on the bench, midfielder Doyle stepped in. First, he imitated Bruce Grobelaar's "wobbly legs" routine for the subsequent penalty, which struck the bar, then the Irishman called upon his Gaelic football experience to keep the ball out his net, helping his side to a 3-1 victory.

RED STAR BELGRADE

Following their Europa League defeat to Milan, the Serbian club were charged by UEFA for "racist behaviour" and "offensive chanting". A group of fans, who should not have even been inside the Rajko Mitic stadium anyway, were caught directing ethnic slurs at Zlatan Ibrahimovic due to his Bosnian heritage.

JONATHAN SUAREZ

Orlando City terminated Suarez's contract after less than a month following his arrest in connection with allegations of sexual battery. A club statement read: "Orlando City SC and Major League Soccer have terminated the contract of Jonathan Suarez, with the defender mutually agreeing to the termination in order to focus on the allegations made against him."

RANGERS RULE-BREAKERS

"It's taking all my power not to stand here and use expletives whenever I get asked about football," said Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon after yet another case of Scottish Premiership players breaking COVID rules. This time it was five Rangers players – Bongani Zungu, Nathan Patterson, Calvin Bassey, Dapo Mebude and Brian Kinnear – caught at a house party that was broken up by police.

FENERBAHCE

The Turkish giants were taken to court by beIN Sports after a bizarre campaign against the broadcaster. Fenerbahce's hierarchy accused the Qatar-based company of being biased against the club and manipulating VAR decisions with their choice of camera angles. Ahead of one fixture, players even wore T-shirts branded with the slogan "beFAIR" using the company's branding. A Turkish court quickly ruled in beIN's favour, and ordered the club to cease.

Struggling...Fenerbahce midfielder Mesut Ozil

"I fully understand it is important for us as referees to maintain our composure throughout the game and always engage with players in a professional manner…I can only apologise to Alan and Ipswich Town"

Referee Darren Drysdale after squaring up to Alan Judge

CLAUDINHO

(Red Bull Bragantino)

Best Player, Best Newcomer, Best Midfielder and top goalscorer: not a bad haul of awards from the 2020 Brazilian season for Claudinho, who has enjoyed an explosive campaign in the country's top flight, a year after helping Bragantino achieve promotion.

His 18 goals took the Serie A new boys to a tenth-place finish, while the awards that he earned in the process puts him in the company of Carlos Tevez, Neymar and Gabriel Jesus as the league's best player.

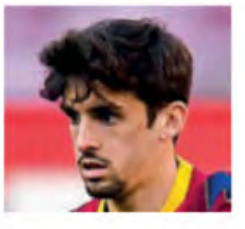
In January the 24-year-old signed a contract until 2024, but Bragantino may face a struggle to keep hold of him, although if a move to Europe does materialise, his choice of clubs will likely be restricted to two. The question for the Red Bull group is whether to send the attacking midfielder to Germany and Leipzig, or give him a year in Austria with RB Salzburg first.

JORDAN HOLSGROVE
(Celta Vigo)
The Scotland Under-21 midfielder has impressed in Spain, scoring a sensational volley in the Copa del Rey.

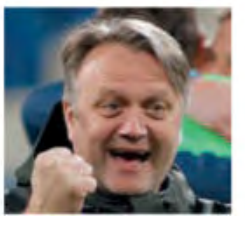
ISAAC DROGBA
(Folgore Caratese)
In the same month that Dennis Bergkamp's son Mitchel joined Watford, Didier Drogba's son began his career in the Italian fourth division.

SHOLA SHORETIRE
(Manchester United)
The 17-year-old recently replaced Norman Whiteside as the youngest-ever player to feature in a European game for Manchester United.

XAVI SIMONS
(Paris Saint-Germain)
Few 17-year-old's debuts have been as eagerly anticipated as the Dutch youngster, who is highly rated having moved to Paris from Barcelona.



FRANCISCO TRINCAO
(Barcelona)
The future may yet be bright for Barca, after their 21-year-old Portuguese winger scored twice on his first La Liga start, a 5-1 win over Alaves.



ERLING MOE
(Molde)
The 50-year-old has guided his side to their best-ever Europa League season, defeating Hoffenheim in the round of 32.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

The Messi question

How do you persuade Lionel Messi to leave his beloved Barcelona and jink his superstar magic in the colours of your club? That's the question exercising the power-brokers of European football heading towards the summer transfer window. They are arriving at different answers.

The first move came from Paris Saint-Germain, positioning themselves as the Romeo of sport and standing under the balcony declaring profound love for Juliet. A succession of players including Neymar, Angel Di Maria and Marco Verratti spoke openly of their desire for Messi to join them in Paris.

It had the feel of a theatrical production, not least when *France Football* magazine merrily mocked up a picture of Messi in a PSG shirt a couple of weeks before they were due to meet Barcelona in the Champions League knockout stages.

Some reports claimed Messi would be deeply embarrassed by this public drama. Manchester City, certainly, were hoping such rumours were well-founded, having opted to do their work in the shadows, believing a better chance of success comes with standing silent and handsome in the background.

Manchester City's possible trump card could be the affection of Messi for their manager Pep Guardiola, an inspirational mentor in the early years of the player's career. That does seem a much more credible argument than the idea Messi would be swayed to join PSG merely because both he and their new head coach Mauricio Pochettino share a heartfelt Argentine attachment to childhood club Newell's Old Boys.

Another European giant likely to be in the mix are Internazionale, who have wooed Messi for 15 years, almost signing him in 2006 after meeting his €150 million release clause, then trying again last summer when the player failed to break free from his Barcelona contract. It's clear that Inter don't have comparable riches to PSG and City, but will money really be the main factor in Messi's decision when he has an open choice this summer? It shouldn't, considering that his current four-year contract at Barcelona is reportedly worth a staggering €555.2m.

Surely, it will be more to do with sporting ambition – about which club could provide the best chance of him winning another Champions League title?

Surely, it will be more to do with psychology – about the hunger to test himself in a new environment, and how energising a new challenge could be?

Let's hope so. It will be much more fun as a football lover to watch Messi weave his wonder with a new team in a different league — much more interesting than another year or two at the Nou Camp. The intensity and the quality of his performances are more likely to be sustained by the demands of chasing success in a fresh arena.

We have seen exactly that in the case of Cristiano Ronaldo and his transfer to Juventus; flourishing anew, adding to his legend even at the age of 36. A switch of clubs is not too late for Messi, who will turn 34 this summer. There can be memorable years ahead; Zlatan Ibrahimovic is inspiring the revival of Milan nearing his 40th birthday.

Messi has declared he will decide his future only at the season's end. Another possible outcome is that Barcelona, if they wish, if their parlous financial situation allows, will tug at Messi's heartstrings and hope all the transfer speculation turns out to have been much ado about nothing.

That won't be a matter of loyalty, but it could be the comfort factor, the comfort of remaining in the only place he has known to call home in football. Aggravations about leaking of contract details and internal fall-outs can fade over months of a season.

The player is correctly proud of his Nou Camp numbers. They are incredible. Messi has scored at least 30 goals in each of the past 12 seasons. In ten of them he struck more than 40 goals. In six of these campaigns his total was above 50. The statistics are incomparable. This season he became the most prolific goalscorer for one club in the history of football, surpassing the 643 goals Pele notched for Santos in competitive matches. And all the time bewitching us with his skill and his sorcery in control of a football.

Lionel Messi cannot do more at Barcelona, and he could retire happy with immediate effect. But the sporting truth, also, is that he can add even more lustre to this most dazzling career by trusting his talent on a new stage.

Decision time... Leo's Barca contract expires this summer

> Will money really be the main factor in Messi's decision when he has an open choice this summer?

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Decision time: 2026 World Cup

The 2026 World Cup in Canada, Mexico and the United States might just be one of those flagship events that beams a signal far beyond the realms of sport, media and marketing.

Mass vaccination roll-outs notwithstanding, COVID-19 and its consequential fall-out will be a factor in daily life around the globe for many months and almost certainly years to come.

No one dare be caught guessing when stadia will return to full capacity. FIFA president Gianni Infantino has envisioned such a blue sky dream for next year's World Cup in Qatar but, whatever his legal qualifications, his bona fides as soothsayer or virologist are limited.

By the time society is infected by a sense of security, rather than coronavirus, the expanded 2026 World Cup is more likely to be the all-encompassing international spectacle to parade a "new normal."

This paints an extra gloss on the United States' own internal contest among the 17 cities chasing ten hosting slots for the first finals to feature 48 teams and 80 matches. FIFA's governing council decides late this year.

Mexico's three cities will almost certainly be Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Canada will present Edmonton and Toronto but Montreal is now doubtful after the Quebec government caught fright at the cost.

Montreal, thinking back to the financially disastrous 1976 Olympics, does have painful history. Tourism minister Caroline Proulx said the government "would have been happy and ready to support the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in Montreal [until] the estimated costs doubled from $50 to $103 million." Vancouver, which hosted the 2015 Women's World Cup final, has already pulled out on cost grounds.

This might just open up an 11th slot for the US of course given that Seattle, up in the far north-west, is only 100 miles from the border and might be an eager geographical substitute. That would be rather embarrassing for Victor Montagliani since the president of host confederation CONCACAF is himself Canadian.

The venues lottery might already have been sorted had it not been for the icy grip of the pandemic, which froze the city selection process. Online workshops were wrapped up last July but COVID controls prevented FIFA following up with on-site inspections.

Thus, April brings more focused talks with the candidate cities ahead of site visits starting in July, health controls permitting. Incidentally FIFA's inspection team now comprises organisation, logistics and security specialists. No role any longer for the greedy fat cats of the old exco, who profited so richly from the power of ballot-box patronage.

The three-way bid was handed hosting rights by FIFA Congress in Moscow in 2018. Victory was achieved with a decisive 134-65 first round knockout over perennial bidders Morocco. It was probably the easiest World Cup award congress has ever had to make.

A few critics havered over the distances involved in a tournament straddling Latin and North America. But the mileage is no greater than Brazil in 2014 or Russia in 2018 and, happily, the transport options are in a totally different class.

As selection overseer Dan Flynn said: "One of the many strengths of our unified bid was the wealth of world-class cities and venues that would make spectacular hosts. That is especially true here in the US with 17 cities that offer everything you'd want and need for the first 48-nation FIFA World Cup in history."

> The expanded 2026 World Cup is more likely to be the all-encompassing international spectacle to parade a "new normal"

ABOVE TOP: Montreal Olympic Stadium...during the 2015 Women's World Cup

MIDDLE: Rose Bowl...host of the 1994 World Cup final

BOTTOM: Azteca Stadium...Mexico's biggest ground

So roll on the internal US bidding battle. The hopeful 17 include seven which played host in 1994 when the US flew solo: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Dallas, Orlando, Boston and Washington DC. Out of the reckoning this time around are Chicago and Pontiac. Hoping to jump aboard are Seattle, Denver, Kansas City, Cincinnati, Houston, Nashville, Atlanta, Miami, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

FIFA, for reasons not only of cost but to appease the green lobby, is expected to return to the once-derided clusters concept. France scrapped this in 1998 because Michel Platini, then the local organising president, believed it unfair that only one or two cities should host superstar teams in the group stage; hence the carousel system which kept everyone giddily (and expensively) on the move.

This was the same Platini whose eco-defying, fan-unfriendly brainstorm saddled his UEFA successors with the 12-nation nightmare of Euro 2020.

A glance at the map of US hopefuls offers up several obvious regional head-to-heads. That means Dallas or Houston in Texas and Miami or Orlando in Florida. The Florida winner would be a tidy cluster partner for Atlanta, one of the most prosperous of US cities with the country's busiest airport and a successful MLS team (though the latter is not an essential prerequisite). That

would likely rule out Nashville.

Los Angeles and San Francisco must be certainties in the west and possibly Seattle to extend the spread of the World Cup gospel. Altitude concerns could weigh against Denver while Kansas City in the Midwest and Cincinnati must both work imaginatively to stake a case. Heading east, Boston and Philadelphia are both strong contenders with Baltimore-Maryland a self-styled underdog.

Ultimately the decisions are not about accidents of geography. Think infrastructure, services, commercial potential, legacy, sustainability, diversity, human rights, etc.

Infrastructure is demonstrably no problem in Orlando, for example. Both MLS and the NBA staged their return-to-action tournaments at Disney's Wide World of Sports facility. As bid leader Jason Siegel says: "We have a great story: we are the number one tourist destination in the US and we have sport in our DNA. We tick all the FIFA boxes."

Orlando may have everything in place but legacy is always an important factor for FIFA. This is a factor pushed by Baltimore-Maryland in creating its own venue identity beyond the shadow of Washington DC some 40 miles away.

Terrance Hasseltine, president of Baltimore-Maryland 2026, says: "We're set up as an ideal city for FIFA. We have a great soccer culture but we also know that the legacy of hosting the World Cup will have an impact on our city like no other event. I think US Soccer and FIFA see Baltimore as a hidden gem. They could make an impact for soccer here like no other city among the 17.

"We're here to compete at the highest level and create strategies that are not only good for soccer but for city and the state. We want to make sure the platforms we establish today live well beyond the World Cup soccer games."

The label soccer was of English or Scottish provenance and drawn from "association" to distinguish the game from "rugger", either by Charles Alcock or Lord Kinnaird back in the days when the Football Association was all there was.

Snooty traditionalists abroad still look down their nose at the US' soccer heritage. But the game's popularity at grassroots level is phenomenal and it also provides a novel and rare opportunity for a sports-loving public to root for a US national team. That is impossible with American football or basketball. That excitement of an international team identity helps explain why US TV bankrolls the Olympics.

In Russia three years ago, the highest number of foreign tickets was sold in the US (88,825). The 1994 World Cup still holds the record for gross and average attendances (3.57m and 68,626) even though it "only" featured 24 teams. Those records will be surpassed easily in 2026.

How ironic if, after the weird winter World Cup in Qatar in the hopefully receding shadow of COVID, it is up to America to make the World Cup great again.

WINNERS

SHANGHAI PORT
Shandong Taishan's loss was Port's gain. The CSL's fourth-placed team replaced its FA Cup winners in the 2021 AFC Champions League due to "overdue payables".

VALENCIA
After months of protesting against the ownership of Peter Lim, fans of the La Liga club have finally got their wish, with a Malaysian prince set to complete a takeover.

EVERTON
In the same week that they ended their wait for a victory at Anfield, the Toffees were granted approval for a new 52,000-seater stadium on Bramley-Moore Dock.

JEFF REINE-ADELAIDE
The Nice midfielder, on loan from Lyon, suffered a ruptured cruciate ligament in his left knee – just 14 months after an identical injury on his right side.

MANUEL LAZZARI
In February, the Lazio winger became the second Serie A player of the season to be suspended for blasphemy.

ROBBIE FOWLER
Fowler's East Bengal finished ninth in the 11-team Indian Super League, although the ex-Liverpool man was banned for the end of the season after making "adverse remarks" about match officials.

LOSERS

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

How Manchester City rediscovered their magic

When Manchester City drew 1-1 at home to West Bromwich Albion on December 15, 2020, it seemed possible that this was, against an admittedly high bar, the worst side Pep Guardiola had ever managed. They seemed sluggish and unimaginative, the snap that had once characterised their press entirely absent. Two months later they were top of the Premier League having won every game they'd played since that draw, and the talk was of a possible quadruple.

Which suggests, perhaps, how easy it is to be lured into snap judgements, to be sucked in by football's habitual narrative that when a slide begins it can be halted only by the sacrifice of the manager.

But that's not to say that the worries about City in the early part of the season were unjustified. They were slow and the 5-2 home defeat to Leicester showed their problems adjusting to a slightly altered approach, the use of a second deep-lying midfielder placing enormous pressure on Kevin De Bruyne and giving Nampalys Mendy and Youri Tielemans time to play through the press.

At the time, there were twin concerns. Firstly, was this the downturn that often afflicts managers after three to four years in a job? Football always seems to function on these three-year cycles, after which there is a need to rejuvenate to stave off entropy, whether that is tweaking tactics, changing a handful of players or replacing the manager. With high-intensity, high-pressing coaches like Guardiola, that seems particularly true and the collapse when it comes can be abrupt if players, worn down by the extreme demands placed upon them, lose faith in the project.

And secondly, this seemed a lot like what often goes wrong for Guardiola in Europe. For a while it was a recurring theme that his sides would be picked off on the break in European knockout ties, occasionally quite unluckily (Barcelona v Chelsea in 2012; Bayern v Real Madrid in 2014; Bayern v Atletico in 2016). Then it became the case that his own efforts to prevent that happening actually made it more likely to happen (Manchester City v Liverpool in 2018; Manchester City v Lyon in 2020). It felt as though we'd seen this before: that by slowing the game down, reducing the intensity of the press to protect City against balls played in behind them, they sacrificed a lot of what made them great and they became ponderous.

> There is a broader lesson there for clubs… sometimes even in modern football, managers can have second comings

Reclaiming the title?...Manchester City celebrate their big win at Anfield

But then, thanks in part to the extraordinary form of Ilkay Gundogan, playing not as a "free eight" (to use the term De Bruyne coined of the roles he and David Silva occupied in Guardiola's first couple of seasons at City), but as a sort of "repressed eight". With Gundogan able to support Rodri at the back of midfield, but still push forward with devastating effect, linking with a more creative midfielder – De Bruyne or Bernardo Silva – in front of him, everything clicked.

Defensive duo...the partnership of Ruben Dias and Stones has been key for City

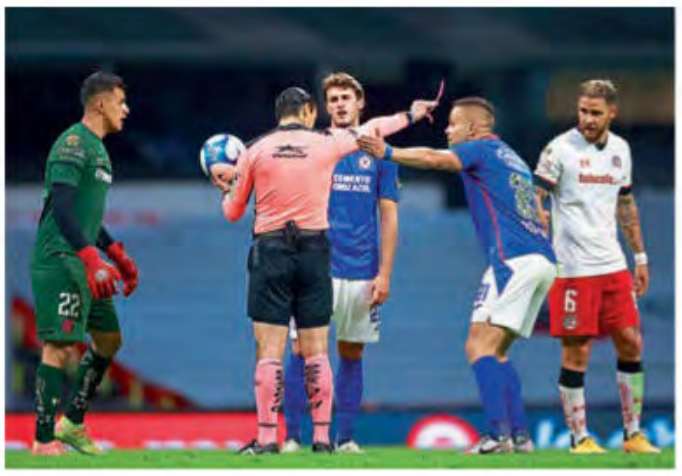
Of greater significance, perhaps, is the tightening up that happened at the back. Pressing is a notoriously difficult aspect of the game to gauge statistically, but one measure is to look at pressures in the final third as a proportion of total pressures: where is a side looking to win the ball back? For four years City and Liverpool had vied to be top of that metric; this season Liverpool are way out in front with City in fifth: there has been a conscious easing off.

Between that West Brom game and the 4-1 thrashing at Anfield on February 7, City only conceded one goal in the league, and that against Chelsea late on when they were already 3-0 up. It's true that it was not the most testing run of fixtures, so it may be that elite sides can still expose them, and it will be a concern that Liverpool's penalty against City came from a straightforward ball in behind, but City look much more solid; not quite as brilliant as two or three years ago but perhaps better balanced.

There is a broader lesson there for clubs. City had faith in Guardiola and backed him in the summer with two costly central defenders, one of whom has barely played, but he has proved himself agile enough to adapt to circumstance and – perhaps – improve on what had gone before. Certainly the talk of decline has rapidly disappeared.

Tottenham, perhaps, given how things have turned out, may think they should have been more patient with Mauricio Pochettino and given him time and resources to rebuild a squad that had gone stale. And Liverpool in particular, can take heart: sometimes even in modern football, managers can have second comings. A concentration of injuries and the pandemic have perhaps exacerbated the situation, but they now are essentially where City were last season: at the end of a cycle and in need of a refurb. Given Jurgen Klopp's stature, there's no reason to think he cannot be as successful at that as Pep Guardiola has been. Not all declines are irreversible.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP



Play on...referee Oscar Macias waves away the protests

1 TWELFTH MAN?

Most accusations of referee bias are usually conspiratorial nonsense, but Liga MX side Cruz Azul could be forgiven for thinking that Oscar Macias was out to get them after their recent clash with Toluca. After midfielder Luis Romo had struck the post with his effort, the ball rebounded to Jonathan Rodriguez, who had the simple task of rolling the ball home. Except his goal-bound shot was blocked – by Macias. The ref then calmly awarded a goal-kick and walked away. To make matters worse, Cruz Azul then proceeded to throw away their two-goal lead, although luckily their blushes – and Macias' – were spared by a second-half winner.

2 *EL LOCO*

Sebastian Abreu has more than earned his "crazy" nickname after signing for the 30th club of his professional career at the ripe old age of 44. The former Uruguay striker recently joined Brazilian side Athletic Club following a short spell in his home country with Boston River. His unique career has not only taken in two World Cups and three Copa Americas, but also spells in Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Greece, Ecuador, Israel, Chile, Paraguay and El Salvador.

3 THANKS A MILLION

Brazilian side Internacional had a real headache ahead of their title-deciding clash with Flamengo in February. In order to field on-loan right-back Rodinei against his parent club they would have to pay an additional fee of 1m real (approximately £130,000). Thankfully, one loyal fan offered to pay the additional fee himself in order to give his side the best possible chance of winning Serie A. How did Rodinei repay the favour? By getting sent off in a 2-1 defeat.

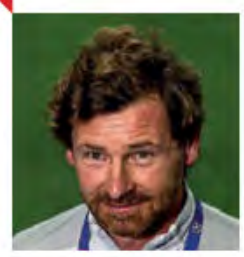
4 KINGS OF TWITTER

Fortaleza C.E.I.F. might be drifting in mid-table of Colombia's second division, but they have ambitions to make a big impact on the world – of social media. The self-styled *Rey del Twitter's* (King of Twitter) latest bid for attention came ahead of their 3-2 victory over Valledupar, when the players took to the pitch wearing capes and novelty sunglasses. The capes were in reference to a bizarre cartoon on the club's website, featuring Carlos Valderrama as a fortune-telling wizard, prophesising the arrival of a new club to "return the fun of soccer to our lands" and ending with a plea to buy the new kit.

5 FANTASY FOOTBALL BAN

In further "Social Media is rubbish" news, Aston Villa have banned their players from playing Fantasy Premier League after a fan from Norway used it to leak information about injuries. Henning, who runs the Twitter account FPL Insider which has over 50,000 followers, created a bot that would monitor Premier League players' selections, and pick up on when they dropped one of their team-mates. So, when a flurry of Villa players dropped star man Jack Grealish from their squads, Henning correctly inferred that the playmaker was injured, and leaked the news days ahead of their clash with Leicester City.

Leaked... Dean Smith was unhappy with the leak



"Being part of the history of this club is a jewel in a coach's journey. This jewel is unique in France. It's impossible not to love this club"

Andre Villas-Boas' parting message to Marseille fans

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Copa winner... Hernan Crespo

EUROPE

Bayern Munich confirmed that this summer they will sign defenders **DAYOT UPAMECANO** from RB Leipzig (€42.5m) and **OMAR RICHARDS** from English Championship side Reading.

Borussia Monchengladbach coach **MARCO ROSE** will also switch Bundesliga clubs this summer, after Borussia Dortmund confirmed his appointment. Meanwhile, Dortmund's rivals Schalke appointed **DIMITRIOS GRAMMOZIS** as head coach, their fifth managerial change of the season.

RB Leipzig completed the permanent signing of on-loan left-back **ANGELINO** from Manchester City.

Bayern-bound...Dayot Upamecano

Marseille hired a replacement for Andre-Villas Boas, recruiting former Chile, Sevilla and Argentina coach **JORGE SAMPAOLI**.

In the English Football League, Bristol City and Bristol Rovers both changed managers, with **NIGEL PEARSON** replacing Dean Holden for the Robins and **JOEY BARTON** taking charge of the Gas. Elsewhere **JONATHAN WOODGATE** was appointed by Bournemouth, **DARREN MOORE** left Doncaster Rovers for Sheffield Wednesday, and **PAUL COOK** replaced Paul Lambert at Ipswich Town.

Huddersfield Town signed former Arsenal wonderkid **YAYA SANOGO** and Burton Albion captured defender **MICHAEL MANCIENNE**.

Kilmarnock appointed former Northern Ireland midfielder **TOMMY WRIGHT** as manager.

Former Japan midfielder **KEISUKE HONDA** joined Portimonense, a month after leaving Botafogo, but left the Portuguese side just a week later.

WILLY SAGNOL, former Bordeaux and Bayern Munich interim manager, was appointed coach of the Georgia national team.

SOUTH AMERICA

MARTIN LASARTE was confirmed as Chile's new coach, replacing Colombia-bound Reinaldo Rueda. **HERNAN CRESPO** took charge of Sao Paulo after winning the Copa Sudamericana with Defensa y Justicia.

CONCACAF

In MLS, Inter Miami signed one-cap England defender **RYAN SHAWCROSS**, while Florida rivals Orlando City landed Brazilian forward **ALEXANDRE PATO**.

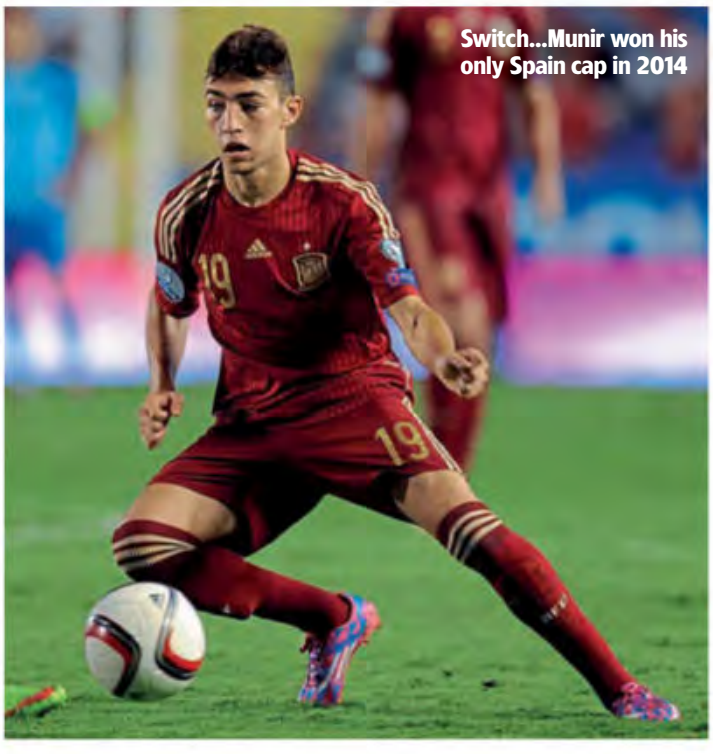
ASIA

Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab announced the signing of former Watford, Shanghai Shenhua and Manchester United forward **ODION IGHALO** on a two-and-a-half-year contract.

AFRICA

Ivory Coast legend **YAYA TOURE** announced his retirment, beginning his coaching career in Ukraine as an assistant with Olimpik Donetsk.

Borussia swap...Marco Rose



Switch...Munir won his only Spain cap in 2014

Flurry of international switches

Several players have taken the chance to change or transfer their international teams in recent weeks. Having already lost two appeals to CAS, Munir El Haddadi was finally allowed to switch from Spain to Morocco, benefitting from changes to FIFA's eligibility rules.

Elsewhere, Bayern Munich youngster Jamal Musiala confirmed that he would represent Germany instead of England, and Dundalk defender Michael Duffy switched from Northern Ireland to Republic of Ireland. Michail Antonio (Jamaica & England) and Jeremie Frimpong (Netherlands & Ghana) are still up for grabs.

"If Didier [Deschamps] stops and I am still in place, the first person that I will go to see is Zidane"

French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet on the next France coach

Appointments, sackings and loans

Retiring... Cabaye left Saint-Etienne in 2020

OUT

EUROPE

Former Premier League players **YOHAN CABAYE**, **NIKICA JELAVIC** and **RON VLAAR** all announced their retirements from playing, as did former LA Galaxy, Standard Liege, Anderlecht and Belgium defender **JELLE VAN DAMME**.

Nantes fired **RAYMOND DOMENECH** less than two months after appointing him as head coach, while **JULIEN STEPHAN** resigned as Rennes coach after going seven games without a win.

Following a serious anterior cruciate ligament injury, USA striker **JORDAN MORRIS** cut short his loan spell at Swansea City and returned home to Seattle Sounders.

Ajax confirmed that promising striker **BRIAN BROBBEY** will depart when his contract ends this summer. **JULIAN RIJKHOFF** will also leave the Amsterdam club to join Borussia Dortmund, while **QUINCY PROMES** joined Spartak Moscow for €8.5m.

ASIA

Jordan goalkeeper **AMER SHAFI** called an end to his career after winning 176 caps in a 25-year career.

CONCACAF

THIERRY HENRY quit his role as coach of Club de Foot Montreal, having been a leading contender for the Bournemouth job.

Major League Soccer exit...Thierry Henry

OBITUARIES

Glenn Roeder...looking on during his spell as manager of Newcastle United

Glenn ROEDER
(1955-2021)

After a 20-year playing career that took in spells at Leyton Orient, QPR, Newcastle United and Watford, Roeder went on to a successful coaching career, first as player-manager of Gillingham, before returning to Watford. After a spell working with Glenn Hoddle as England coach, he took charge of West Ham United and later Newcastle, guiding both sides to seventh in the Premier League table.

Tony COLLINS
(1926-2021)

A true pioneer, Collins made history as the first-ever black manager in English league football. After a playing career which featured spells at York City, Watford, Norwich City, Torquay United and Crystal Palace, he joined Rochdale in 1959, and a year later was appointed player-manager at the club. After ending his playing days in 1961, Collins spent another six years in charge at Spotland, before going on to a career as a scout. He worked for Don Revie at Leeds United, then followed the manager to the FA, compiling reports on England's opponents. He returned to management briefly in 1980, taking caretaker charge of Bristol City, before later working as a scout at Manchester United.

Ian ST JOHN
(1938-2021)

In his later years, the former Scotland forward became synonymous with weekend television as one half of the onscreen partnership with Jimmy Greaves on the Saturday show *Saint and Greavsie*. The two ex-strikers would look ahead to the weekend's action in a humorous and irreverent manner, with St John often the straight man to Greaves' jokes.

Yet his career as a broadcaster could never overshadow his football ability. Few players were as important to Liverpool's rise under Bill Shankly than St John: when he arrived in May 1961, the club were languishing in the Second Division, yet his prolific partnership with Roger Hunt took the Reds up to the First Division as champions. His goals fired the side to two top-flight league titles, an FA Cup and the final of the Cup Winners' Cup, and when he left after a decade at the club, he was eighth on their list of all-time top scorers.

***Saint and Greavsie*...Jimmy Greaves (L) and Ian St John**

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

FEBRUARY 2021

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	21
Ederson (Manchester City)	12
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	5
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Milan)	4
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	3
David De Gea (Manchester United)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	2
Samir Handanovic (Internazionale)	2
Antonio Adan (Sporting)	2
Andrea Consigli (Sassuolo)	1
Alex Remiro (Real Sociedad)	1
Koen Casteels (Wolfsburg)	1
David Marshall (Derby County)	1
Hugo Lloris (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus)	1
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Bernd Leno (Arsenal)	1
Mike Maignan (Lille)	1
Bono (Sevilla)	1
Andreas Linde (Molde)	1

DEFENDERS

Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	18
Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid)	14
Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	14
John Stones (Manchester City)	13
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	11
Angelino (RB Leipzig)	10
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	9
Stefan Savic (Atletico Madrid)	8
Jose Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	8
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	7
Achraf Hakimi (Internazionale)	7
David Alaba (Bayern Munich)	7
Dayot Upamecano (RB Leipzig)	6
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	5
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	5
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	5
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	4
Simon Kjaer (Milan)	4
Kieran Trippier (Atletico Madrid)	4
Kurt Zouma (Chelsea)	4
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	3
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	3
Danilo (Juventus)	3
Jose Fonte (Lille)	3
Milan Skriniar (Internazionale)	3
Raphael Varane (Real Madrid)	2
Guillermo Maripan (Monaco)	2
Felipe (Atletico Madrid)	2
Reece James (Chelsea)	2
Thomas Meunier (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Sergio Reguilon (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Alessio Romagnoli (Milan)	2
Lucas Vazquez (Real Madrid)	2
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	2
Cristian Romero (Atalanta)	2
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	2
Robin Gosens (Atalanta)	2
Brandon Mechele (Club Brugge)	2
Antonio Rudiger (Chelsea)	2
Francesco Acerbi (Lazio)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Jordan Amavi (Marseille)	1
Dedryck Boyata (Hertha Berlin)	1
Cala (Cadiz)	1
Davide Calabria (Milan)	1
Sebastian Coates (Sporting)	1
Eric Dier (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Dodo (Shakhtar Donetsk)	1
Jean-Kevin Duverne (Brest)	1
Fabinho (Liverpool)	1
Faitout Maouassa (Rennes)	1
Nicolas Gavory (Standard Liege)	1
Vincenzo Grifo (Freiburg)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Michael Keane (Everton)	1
Joules Kounde (Sevilla)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Chancel Mbemba (Porto)	1
Pepe (Porto)	1
Zaidu Sanusi (Porto)	1
Niklas Sule (Bayern Munich)	1
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	1
Nico Elvedi (Borussia Monchengladbach)	1
Nuno Mendes (Sporting)	1
Leonardo Spinazzola (Roma)	1
Cesar Azpiliqueta (Chelsea)	1
Matteo Darmian (Internazionale)	1
Nordi Mukiele (RB Leipzig)	1
Kevin Mbabu (Wolfsburg)	1
Evan N'Dicka (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Emerson (Real Betis)	1
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	1
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	1
Luke Shaw (Manchester United)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	24
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	24
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	16
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	14
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	14
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	7
Mikel Oyarzabal (Real Sociedad)	6
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	6
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	6
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	5
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	5
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	5
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	4
Hakan Calhanoglu (Milan)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	2
Karl Toko Ekambi (Lyon)	2
Lars Stindl (Borussia Monchengladbach)	2
Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich)	2
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham)	2
Max Kruse (Union Berlin)	2
James Rodriguez (Everton)	2
David Silva (Real Sociedad)	2
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	2
Joao Palhinha (Sporting)	2
Angel Di Maria (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Benjamin Andre (Lille)	1
James Maddison (Leicester City)	1
Leon Bailey (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jonathan Bamba (Lille)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Domenico Berardi (Sassuolo)	1

Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Papu Gomez (Sevilla)	1
Jack Grealish (Aston Villa)	1
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	1
Davy Klaassen (Ajax)	1
Koke (Atletico Madrid)	1
Manuel Locatelli (Sassuolo)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Roma)	1
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	1
Leandro Paredes (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Yusuf Yazici (Lille)	1
Pedri (Barcelona)	1
Luis Alberto (Lazio)	1
Raul Garcia (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Jordan Henderson (Liverpool)	1
Thomas Lemar (Atletico Madrid)	1
Paul Pogba (Manchester United)	1
Marcel Sabitzer (RB Leipzig)	1
Jonathan Ikone (Lille)	1
Jesse Lingard (West Ham United)	1
Marco Verratti (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Aleksandr Golovin (Monaco)	1
Tomas Soucek (West Ham United)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	44
Romelu Lukaku (Internazionale)	18
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	17
Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Milan)	14
Lionel Messi (Barcelona)	13
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	12
Cristiano Ronaldo (Juventus)	9
Luis Suarez (Atletico Madrid)	7
Joao Felix (Atletico Madrid)	7
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	6
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	6
Youssef En-Nesyri (Sevilla)	6
Andre Silva (Eintracht Frankfurt)	5
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	4
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	4
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	3
Jamie Vardy (Leicester City)	2
Burak Yilmaz (Lille)	2
Pote (Sporting)	1
Iago Aspas (Celta Vigo)	1
Anwar El Ghazi (Aston Villa)	1
Olivier Giroud (Chelsea)	1
Sadio Mane (Liverpool)	1
Dominic Calvert-Lewin (Everton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Juventus)	1
Kevin Volland (Monaco)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1
Giorgos Giakoumakis (VVV-Venlo)	1
Josip Ilicic (Atalanta)	1
Antoine Griezmann (Barcelona)	1
Jadon Sancho (Borussia Dortmund)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

NEW! From the publishers of WorldSoccer

World Soccer Presents

WorldSoccer Presents
GREATEST RIVALRIES
SPECIAL COLLECTORS EDITION

Save 15%

A new bi-monthly 100-page souvenir bookazine from ***World Soccer***, continuing with ***Greatest Rivalries***, which focuses on international and club football's biggest and most controversial derby clashes.

WorldSoccer Presents
FACE TO FACE
SPECIAL COLLECTORS EDITION
A COLLECTION OF WORLD SOCCER INTERVIEWS WITH FOOTBALL'S GREATEST STARS

ISSUE 3: Face to Face

Subscribe today and pay just £40.94 every 6 issues

Great reasons to subscribe

- *Pay just £40.94 for 6 issues – saving 15% on the shop price*
- *Each issue delivered directly to your door for **FREE***

Subscribe online at shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSP120 or call 01959 543 747 quote code WSP120

Calls charged at your standard network rate. Lines are open 8am-5.30pm Monday to Friday.

Terms and conditions: Offer available for UK customers only. You will pay £40.94 every 6 issues saving 15%. For overseas rates please visit shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSP. Full UK subscription rate for 6 issues is £47.94, USA & EU £54, RoW £60. Here at Kelsey Publishing we take your privacy very seriously and will only use your personal information to administer your account and to provide the products and services you have requested from us. We will only contact you about our special offers via the preferences you have indicated, and you can update these at any time by emailing us at cs@kelsey.co.uk or by calling us on 01959 543 747.

Rangers & Celtic

Celtic in total disarray while arch-rivals Rangers re-establish themselves as Glasgow's top dogs

It was Glasgow's *Sliding Doors* moment. Steven Gerrard went in one direction, Neil Lennon in the other.

The two men, who are neighbours in the city's west end, had deeply contrasting fates. With Rangers putting the finishing touches to their remarkable Scottish Premiership season, Gerrard was being lauded while Lennon was terminated.

Just 36 hours before Rangers clinched a place in the last 16 of the Europa League – for the second season running – by hammering Belgian side Antwerp 9-5 on aggregate, Lennon was being sacked by Celtic some 21 years after his arrival there as a player.

Lennon won five titles as a Celtic player, and five more in two spells as a manager, so you would have got long odds on Gerrard being the last man standing when the 2020-21 season began.

It was the former Liverpool captain whose future was under scrutiny, having not won a trophy in his first two years at Ibrox. However, the 40-year-old Gerrard has now delivered, alongside his assistant Gary McAllister, the former Scotland captain, who was an Anfield team-mate of Gerrard.

The pair created a team that merged attacking threat and defensive solidity. They built on the confidence supplied by last season's Europa League adventure, which was ended by Bayer Leverkusen, and learned from the domestic pain of 2019-20. Last season they blew their title hopes by dropping 13 points in nine games after the winter break, having won at Celtic Park at the end of 2019.

This season however, they have been ruthlessly efficient. At the time of writing, Rangers have not lost a single Premiership game. Their only domestic defeat came in the League Cup, when they were beaten 3-2 by St. Mirren.

Gerrard's side had scored 73 Premiership goals even before the start of March and conceded only nine. That had much to do with talismanic goalkeeper Allan McGregor, still influential at 39. Right-back James Tavernier was prolific in attack and defence, aided by centre-backs Connor Goldson and Filip Helander. In midfield, Glen Kamara (just a £50,000 purchase from Dundee) flourished alongside the experienced Steven Davies. Alfredo Morelos provided plenty of goals but Ryan Kent was the outstanding attacker.

Rangers are No.1 in both Glasgow and Scotland for the first time since 2011 – they went out of business and had to re-form as a new club in the fourth tier just a year later. Yet that case still casts a long shadow; some of the debts that were incurred at the time have never been repaid. In 2020, HMRC confirmed that it is still owed £70m, while the modern club is still bleeding money. In the last nine years, they have made a loss in every season but one: the first, when they posted a £1.2m profit while playing in the Third Division (since renamed Scottish League Two). In the following six years they lost over £50m, before Gerrard pushed the wage bill even higher.

Lennon, meanwhile, paid the price for Celtic's failure to win their iconic record tenth successive title. A wretched autumn saw them lose to Rangers at home and finish bottom of their Europa League group. Lennon looked to have bought himself some time by winning the re-arranged 2019-20 Scottish Cup final just before Christmas, beating Hearts on penalties, but two weeks later they were beaten at Ibrox.

Celtic dominated the first hour of that derby, but lost momentum after a red card for Nir Bitton. A Callum McGregor own goal minutes later condemned them to a 1-0 defeat, leaving them 19 points behind the leaders, albeit with three games in hand.

Derby delight...Joe Aribo celebrates scoring Rangers' winner v Celtic

> Lennon paid the price for Celtic's failure to win their iconic record tenth successive title

Sacked...Lennon looks on during Celtic's Glasgow derby defeat

Afterwards, Lennon took his players to Dubai for a training camp, just as Scotland had shut its borders for COVID. It was a huge error of judgement by the club and 13 key players had to self-isolate on return. As a result, an under-strength Celtic drew their next three games.

Following the sacking, Gerrard was keen to offer his sympathies: "I really appreciate the job Neil has done for Celtic and take no satisfaction in seeing a rival manager lose his job. I know Neil well and have enjoyed our battles but once the dust settles we can share a pint together again."

World Soccer's pre-season preview of the Premiership suggested that the campaign would be shaped by the pandemic, but even that gave little hint about the reality.

In October, Celtic were hit by

numerous players having to self-isolate for COVID after international duty with France (Odsonne Edouard), Scotland (Ryan Christie and David Turnbull) and Israel (Bitton and Hatem El Hamed), and consequently had to field an under-strength side for the home defeat by Rangers.

Lennon alluded to these issues in his statement after Celtic's decision. "We have experienced a difficult season, due to so many factors. It is frustrating not to be able to hit the heights of before but I worked hard to turn it around. The club will always be a part of me and I will always be a Celtic supporter."

The club will take their time to find a replacement, and could be prepared to wait until after Euro 2020 has finished to appoint Scotland manager Steve Clarke. Bookmakers have the former Kilmarnock manager as favourite to take over, ahead of ex-Bournemouth boss Eddie Howe and Lennon's assistant, John Kennedy, who is currently in charge on an interim basis. Frank Lampard's name has also been mentioned.

Phil Gordon

Patson Daka

In-form African striker set for a high-profile summer move

Red Bull Salzburg have not always been the most popular of clubs since the energy drinks manufacturer took charge in 2005. In particular, its disdain for tradition – changing the team colours from the purple to corporate red and white, while also trying to wipe out the club's history antagonised the fans so much that some formed a breakaway club.

But there is also no denying that Salzburg have since become one of the most successful clubs in scouting and developing players from around the world. In the last few years, they have nurtured raw talents such as Sadio Mane, Erling Haaland, Naby Keita, Takumi Minamino, Dayot Upamecano and Dominik Szoboszlai before sending them on their way to the Bundesliga or Premier League for huge profits.

> "Between winning the Africa Cup of Nations and playing at the World Cup, I'd go for the latter"
>
> **Patson Daka**

The latest off the production line is Zambia's Patson Daka, a likeable, humble 22-year-old who by the end of February had scored 24 goals in 26 matches this season, including 17 in 15 Austrian Bundesliga appearances.

Daka is another example of Salzburg's willingness to go to parts of the world that others overlook. Despite having one of the stronger African leagues and winning the Africa Cup of Nations in 2012, Zambia is not on the radar of talent hunters who tend to concentrate their searches in West Africa.

Daka grew up in Kafue, in central Zambia, and his late father Nathtali played as a winger for the local side Nitrogen Stars during the 1990s, although injury cut short his career.

He was initially spotted in 2012 when he took part in trials organised as part of a pan-African grassroots initiative, and by 2015 had made his full international debut. The following year, the striker was spotted by Freddie Kanoute's 12Management agency and at the start of 2017 joined Liefering, an Austrian second division side used as a feeder for Salzburg.

It turned out to be quite a year. After moving to Salzburg that summer, Daka helped them win the UEFA Youth League. He was top scorer and Player of the Tournament as Zambia won the U20 Africa Cup of Nations, then helped them reach the quarter-finals of the U20 World Cup in South Korea. "It's a year that I will remember and treasure for the rest of my life," he says.

Daka finally won a regular place in Salzburg's team in 2019-20 and became their main marksman after Haaland left for Borussia Dortmund halfway through the season. He seized his chance and finished with 24 goals in 31 league games, including three hat-tricks. This season has been even more prolific.

Daka's exploits have been closely followed back home, something he is fully aware of. "Everything I do, I do for the country because they are looking at me, they are following me and what I am doing," he said. In particular, he wants to help Zambia reach their first-ever World Cup.

"If I had to choose between winning the Africa Cup of Nations and playing at the World Cup, I'd go for the latter. The country has been dreaming about it for such a long time and it would be great to make it happen."

Zambia have been drawn with Tunisia, Mauritania and Equatorial Guinea in Group B of the African qualifying competition for Qatar 2022, and Daka is confident they will be up to the task: "I know we've got what it takes to get there."

Brian Homewood

Goal machine...Daka celebrates scoring in a Champions League play-off back in September

Fikayo Tomori

Milan loanee has made an encouraging start to life in Italy

It says much about 23-year-old, Canada-born England international, Fikayo Tomori, that within weeks of his arrival on loan from Chelsea, commentators and fans alike were already suggesting that Milan should work hard to hold on to him when his loan terminates in June.

Before January, Tomori was little-known in Italy, but announced his arrival with some impressive early displays, starting with a 2-1 Coppa Italia defeat to city rivals Internazionale. Those early performances have been enough to convince critics in *Gazzetta dello Sport* and *La Repubblica* that the loanee could have a bright future in Italian football.

Tomori's peer group have also reacted very positively to his arrival at Milanello. "I have to say that I didn't know him, but you can see immediately that he is a good player," Milan defender Davide Calabria said of his new team-mate. "He is aggressive, but not too aggressive. He could prove very useful to us."

Even the team's leader, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, has been impressed, according to Tomori: "Alexis Sanchez got the ball and the manager had said to get close to their attackers, so when he got the ball I decided to go straight in," he said, reflecting on his debut. "I fouled him and Zlatan was like, 'that is it, that is what you should do, be aggressive!'"

Tomori, of course, picked a great moment to move to Milan. The seven-time European champions have been enjoying something of a renaissance this season after years out of the limelight. To the surprise of many, they have led Serie A for most of the season, only knocked off top spot on Valentine's Day, when Inter went a point clear of their city rivals. A week later, Inter stretched their advantage, winning 3-0 in the derby.

Yet Milan's season remains positive, a point acknowledged by Tomori on his arrival: "I came here because this is a club with a great history, great players and, of course, the team is in a great moment right now," he explained to Milan TV. And it wasn't just the history of the Italian giants that persuaded him. "My agent told me Milan wanted to speak to me and he asked me if I knew who the technical director is," said Tomori. "He said it was Paolo Maldini and I was like, 'Oh.'

Settled in...Milan coach Stefano Pioli instructs Tomori during the 4-0 win over Crotone

> "I didn't know him, but you can see immediately that he is a good player. He is aggressive, but not too aggressive. He could prove very useful to us"
>
> **Milan defender Davide Calabria on Tomori**

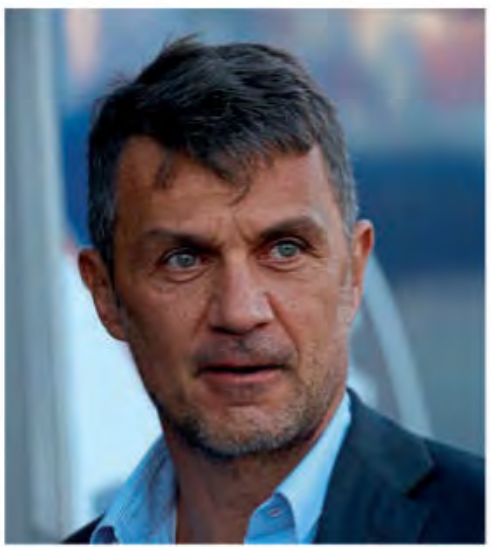
"We had a scheduled Zoom call and he was just there on the screen in front of me. It was like, 'whoa'! He spoke English to me perfectly and it was surreal, it was strange. I got off the call and I was thinking, 'Wow, I've just spoken to Paolo Maldini.'"

Tomori is well aware of Maldini's legendary status, and receives any feedback from Milan's record appearance-maker eagerly.

"Maldini's at the training ground every day. After games as well and he will always say, 'Congratulations, well done.' Even if it's just a passing comment or a 'well done', the fact I'm a defender and it's come from him, it fills you with pride. It's like Lionel Messi saying well done to a young attacker. It's special."

It is no surprise to hear a player praise their new club, particularly one as illustrious as Milan, but it is clear that Tomori is not simply paying lip-service. The young defender has spied an opportunity to develop into an elite centre-back at the club that produced Maldini, Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta.

Gareth Southgate will have similar hopes. The England boss is not exactly



Influential...Milan technical director Paolo Maldini

spoilt for choice in the centre-back department, and will be keeping a watchful eye on the San Siro between now and the European Championship. Tomori has 35 youth caps, starring in the side that won the Under-20 World Cup in 2017, a year after being named in the Team of the Tournament at the Under-19 Euros.

He made his senior debut in a 4-0 away win versus Kosovo in a Euro 2020 qualifier in November 2019, however he has not featured for the Three Lions since. Some have suggested that, with Tomori previously eligible to play for Canada and Nigeria, that pledging his allegiance to England so early could hinder his international career. However, Tomori has no doubts: "Once I got the call-up there was no doubt I would commit. It is a dream. Growing up in England and seeing the players playing at Wembley, it was such a good feeling."

And now with centre-back places up for grabs ahead of the Euros, Tomori's time may come. Other than Harry Maguire, who is certain of a place in Southgate's squad, and John Stones after his revitalisation at Manchester City, Tomori will likely be jostling with Kyle Walker, Eric Dier, Michael Keane, Tyrone Mings, Conor Coady and Joe Gomez (if fit) for the remaining spots.

The next question then is – if all goes well in Milan and Tomori revives his England career – how hard will the Italians work to hold on to this clearly promising player? There is believed to be an agreement to make the loan permanent for £25 million, although there is no guarantee that Milan are willing to pay the fee. Clearly, much will depend on how their season, both in Europe and Serie A, shakes down.

When the deal was announced, Frank Lampard gave the impression that Chelsea wanted Tomori to gain useful experience, while his replacement, Thomas Tuchel, has spoken of the defender's "high potential." That would suggest that Chelsea will want him back.

However, as Chris Smalling can attest, once a player decides that he wants to stay in Italy, he may just end up staying. Tomori might prove to be one who, to the displeasure of some Chelsea fans, will get away.

Paddy Agnew

CSKA Sofia

Owner Grisha Ganchev announces his departure from the club – again

After years of uncertainty and off-the-pitch issues, CSKA Sofia appeared to finally be returning to relative calm in 2020-21. For the first time in a decade, Bulgaria's most successful club had qualified for the Europa League group stage, and had a serious chance of preventing Ludogorets from winning a tenth league title in a row.

Then, a football bomb exploded. Owners Grisha Ganchev and Julian Indzhov announced they would step down after one of the club's fan groups, "the Offenders", criticised the club's transfer policy following the departure of Gambia striker Ali Sowe.

The fans' concern was understandable: not only was Sowe the club's top scorer with 14 goals in all competitions, including five in Europe, his league tally of eight accounted for a third of the team's entire output. When he departed in February, only one other player had scored more than once in the league. Russian side Rostov paid €500,000 to sign the forward on loan until the end of the season, with the option to make it permanent for €3 million.

In a special press conference, CSKA's executive director Plamen Markov announced that their decision is final and that Ganchev will withdraw from football forever. He added: "I am not sure that Ganchev will change his mind. He is fighting on different fronts and is sick and tired of all these problems."

These "problems" go well beyond fans' disgruntlement, and nobody believes that the Offenders' statement is the real reason for Ganchev's exit. One of his companies, Litex Motors, went bankrupt in 2017, though it is not clear why. The stadium is an issue too, which is currently owned by the Ministry of Sport. Plans to renovate and share ownership were discussed, but went cold.

The two owners, with 77 per cent of the club's shares, insist there will be no financial problems. "I will leave the club with €5-6m, instead of €40m of debt," declared Ganchev. According to commercial law, they must offer their shares to the third co-owner, Bulgaria legend Hristo Stoichkov, who currently owns 20 per cent, although his intentions are unclear.

The pair have not been allowed to leave quietly. Former players Dimitar Penev (national coach when Bulgaria reached the semi-finals at USA '94), Dimitar Yakimov, Petar Zhekov and Asparuh Nikodimov all sent a letter to Ganchev asking him to continue at the club. A small group of fans were invited for a meeting in his office too, although the contents of that remained private.

As it stands, the future of the club is uncertain. Some have called for a union with CSKA 1948, formed in 2016 after the club's expulsion from the top tier. They spent a year in the third division – winning the title and the Bulgarian Cup, the first third-tier side to do so – before Ganchev purchased Litex Lovech's professional licence, allowing the club to bypass the second division and return to the top flight. Several club members disagreed, however, and consequently split away to form the new outfit. Having begun in amateur football, they won the second division last season to reach the top flight.

In amongst all this, the opinion of technical director Alan Pardew is unclear. The ex-Newcastle and West Ham boss arrived in Bulgaria last year.

Since buying the club, Ganchev has threatened to leave three times, so nothing is certain. One potential outcome is that his son, Danail, along with Indzhov's son, Deyan, take on the shares while their fathers pull the strings in the background. Whatever happens, it is yet another crisis for CSKA, and a sense of *déjà vu* for their fans.

Rumen Paytashev

Transfer...Ali Sowe's loan move triggered Ganchev's departure

Giorgos Giakoumakis

The Eredivisie goal machine that came out of nowhere

It would be fair to assume that the Eredivisie top scorer award would automatically go to an Ajax or PSV player every season. But you'd be wrong: in seven out of the last ten campaigns, players from modest clubs like Heracles (Cyriel Dessers, 2020), Vitesse (Wilfried Bony, 2013), Heerenveen (Alfred Finnbogason, 2014 and Bas Dost, 2012) NEC Nijmegen (Bjorn Vleminckx, 2011) and AZ (Vincent Janssen, 2016 and Alireza Jahanbakhsh, 2018) have all topped the charts.

This season is unlikely to be an exception, with Giorgos Giakoumakis of VVV-Venlo miles ahead of the rest. By mid-February, the Greek striker had already netted 22 goals with his nearest challenger, PSV winger Donyell Malen, on 13.

What makes it even more remarkable is that the 26-year-old had never been a prolific goalscorer before; this season he has more than doubled his total career output. The summer bargain has virtually kept VVV in the top division by himself.

Giakoumakis was elected Player of the Month for January after a rocket restart following the short winter break. Within a month he scored 11 times, including four against both ADO Den Haag and Vitesse. If he continues, Giakoumakis may even break the all-time record of Coen Dillen, the PSV striker who scored 43 goals in one season in 1956-57.

It has come out of nowhere; the striker from Crete has never known form like it. Only in one other season had he ever reached double figures, scoring 11 for Greek side Platanias in 2016-17. Subsequent campaigns at AEK Athens, OFI Crete and Polish club Gornik Zabrze (on loan) yielded a grand total of six league goals.

Suddenly, he simply can't stop scoring. And that is good news for VVV, who were hotly tipped for relegation, and with good reason: this season, two clubs instead of the usual one will drop out of the Eredivisie, and after their 13-0 humiliation at the hands of Ajax, Venlo were expected to be one of them.

That result hit the Limburg club hard, but also their striker. He admitted he had suffered for about a month from the defeat, even being afraid to go to the supermarket and face the people.

Prolific...Giakoumakis has been a revelation for VVV this season

But he rose, and so did his team. His goals almost certainly mean that they will stay up, and it is not hyperbolic to say that he has done it single-handedly. Those 22 goals came in just 21 appearances, and accounted for 63 per cent of his team's league total. No other club in Europe's top eight leagues are as reliant on one player for goals as VVV-Venlo. The next player on that list was Joao Pedro, scoring 46 per cent of Cagliari's goals. Venlo's reliance on their front man is at an absurd level.

Who is the mastermind behind the deal? All credit goes to technical director Stan Valckx. The former *Oranje*, PSV and Sporting player followed a tip all the way to Poland to watch Giakoumakis in action. Although he left the pitch injured, Valckx had seen and heard enough. The player was willing to come, and a deal was struck with AEK Athens for just €180,000.

Today of course, he is worth much more. He claims that he could have left in January to join a South Korean side for "big, big money", but he chose to stay.

That is partly to emulate his idol Nikos Machlas, the former Vitesse and Ajax player who won the league's Golden Boot in 1998 with 34 goals, but also for his international ambition.

> No other club in Europe's top eight leagues are as reliant on one player for goals as VVV-Venlo

The Greek national team is coached by Dutchman John van't Schip, and the Eredivisie is very much on his radar. Giakoumakis made his debut last November scoring after just 17 minutes in a friendly against Cyprus.

What's next? He will almost certainly move to a better league late this year. Is it wise? That remains to be seen. Nearly all the aforementioned predecessors never reached a strike rate like that again, meaning that Giakoumakis is likely enjoying the peak of his career right now.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

International... Giakoumakis made his Greece debut in November

Fabio Cannavaro

Spotlight is on the Guangzhou coach ahead of the new CSL season

For a defender who seemed so sure-footed and confident of where he, and everyone else, was at any given time, Fabio Cannavaro has rarely looked in control in either of his two spells as coach of China's biggest club, Guangzhou FC.

Take recent events, for example. There was some discussion as to whether the 2006 World Cup-winning captain would still be in charge of the team formerly known as Guangzhou Evergrande (the "Evergrande" suffix has been dropped, with Chinese football authorities seeking to remove corporate titles from club names to encourage more community-mindedness) for the 2021 season.

It was only in February when Cannavaro appeared in the club's video to wish fans in China's third-biggest city a prosperous Year of the Ox that there was confidence he would be in charge for the coming season. Being fired by Evergrande – the company that took over the club in 2010 and invested to make the Reds the dominant force in Chinese football – is not out of the question. After all, it happened in 2015.

Following Marcello Lippi was never going to be easy. The 2006 World Cup-winning coach arrived in Guangzhou in 2012 and left at the end of 2014, returning to Europe with three Chinese Super League titles and a first Chinese win in the AFC Champions League.

In came Cannavaro and halfway through his first season, with concerns about defensive issues, he was fired with the club also making noises about wanting to go in a more Brazilian direction. It seemed harsh, given that Cannavaro left the team top of the table and in the knockout stages of the Champions League.

Luiz Felipe Scolari took the job and quickly won that continental title and also the 2015, 2016 and 2017 Chinese Super League. When the 2002 World Cup winner left in November 2017, Cannavaro returned to the hot seat after less than 30 months away.

Between his two stints in Guangzhou, Cannavaro built his reputation. After a short spell with Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, he returned to China in 2016 to take charge of Tianjin Quanjian, an ambitious second-tier club. Cannavaro came in halfway through the season and delivered promotion. In the top tier in 2017, he led Tianjin to an impressive third place with stars such as Anthony Modeste, Axel Witsel and Alexandre Pato at his disposal, though it was at the back where the team impressed.

That record earned him a return to Guangzhou in November 2017, succeeding Scolari who had just delivered an eighth successive title. In his second spell, Cannavaro had to deal with the improving Shanghai SIPG and, in 2018, Guangzhou ended up missing out on top spot for the first time since 2010. Despite that, he kept his job and even ended up with some extra responsibilities.

> Cannavaro has rarely looked in control in either of his two spells as head coach of China's biggest club

In March 2019 he succeeded Lippi again, this time as coach of the China national team (not surprising given its close ties with Guangzhou, with reports that the club had been paying Lippi's wages on a part-time basis). Lippi didn't manage to do much with China and neither did Cannavaro. Following defeats to Thailand and Uzbekistan, the 47-year-old stepped down after just six weeks, saying he needed to focus on his main job and his family.

He won the title in 2019 but it was overshadowed somewhat as, towards the end of the season after one win in five and inconsistent performances, Evergrande bosses publicly sent him on a corporate culture training-course.

It was humiliating and, when Cannavaro was spotted in Dubai, the assumption was that he had walked out. But he was soon back in China and being assessed by Evergrande chairman Xu Jiayin.

"Cannavaro handed a written report to Xu Jiayin, which was a serious summarisation and deep reflection," the club announced in November 2019. "Xu praised Cannavaro's diligence, quick responding and good work at developing young players; but he also criticised the Italian on poor error-correcting ability and team management."

Yet Cannavaro already knew full well that, in football, Evergrande's culture is all about winning. In 2020, a season seriously affected by coronavirus, Guangzhou missed out on the title again and crashed out of the AFC Champions League at the group stage. There were more reports that he was on his way out again with playing legend Zheng Zhi, formerly of Celtic and Charlton Athletic, taking over. Yet Cannavaro still seems to be hanging on.

His position looks to be precarious however, and a bad start to the season could see Cannavaro fired by Guangzhou for the second time.

John Duerden

Point to prove... Guangzhou coach Fabio Cannavaro

eyewitness

Tim Vickery reports

BRAZIL

Flamengo back on top

Rio side seal back-to-back titles on dramatic final day

The final day of the 2020 Brazilian Championship, when amid heart-stopping drama Flamengo finished a point ahead of Internacional to win the title for the second year running, was also marked by a peak in Brazil's coronavirus death toll – the largest since July 29, when the action was just days from getting underway.

This, then, was the COVID cup. All the teams suffered spurts of the virus. Santos striker Raniel went down with thrombosis soon after he had "recovered," worrying evidence of the risks that are being run. The pandemic changed the dates of the competition; instead of May-December, the matches were played between early August and the end of February. The games came thick and fast, extending into high summer, with gruelling 4pm kick-offs.

In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that form oscillated wildly, nor that it proved so hard to fight on multiple fronts. This was one of the reasons for a six-horse race whittling down to a denouement between Flamengo and Internacional.

Gremio had hauled themselves into contention. But over recent years they have opted to give priority to knockout tournaments, and fell away after reaching the final of the domestic cup – where they met Palmeiras, whose deep squad made it possible to believe that they could sustain a league challenge; but only briefly. They won the Libertadores, travelled to the Club World Cup and saw any league title hopes collapse under the weight of a fixture pile up, while also finishing a disappointing fourth place in Qatar.

Their local rivals Sao Paulo were in pole position at the turn of the year. But they collapsed under the weight of self-inflicted pressures. With only a Copa Sudamericana to their credit since 2008, the burden of expectation proved too much for interesting coach Fernando Diniz and his attack-minded team. When they started to wobble, the team bus was even attacked by some of their own supporters. This, obviously, did nothing to improve matters. The team faded and Diniz was sacked.

Jorge Sampaoli's dynamic Atletico Mineiro were also in the hunt before flattering to deceive. The summer heat did not suit their intense style, and the side were never quite good enough in both penalty areas.

And that left Flamengo of Rio de Janeiro, and Internacional from the southern city of Porto Alegre – both of whom changed their coach at around the same time.

In Inter's case this was forced. Eduardo Coudet was lured away to Spain, to be replaced by the veteran Abel Braga. This led to a switch in style: Coudet's side were based on midfield possession, while Braga's were more of a counter-attacking team. The conditions probably favoured a more cautious approach, and Inter put together a sequence of nine

Winners...Flamengo lift the trophy

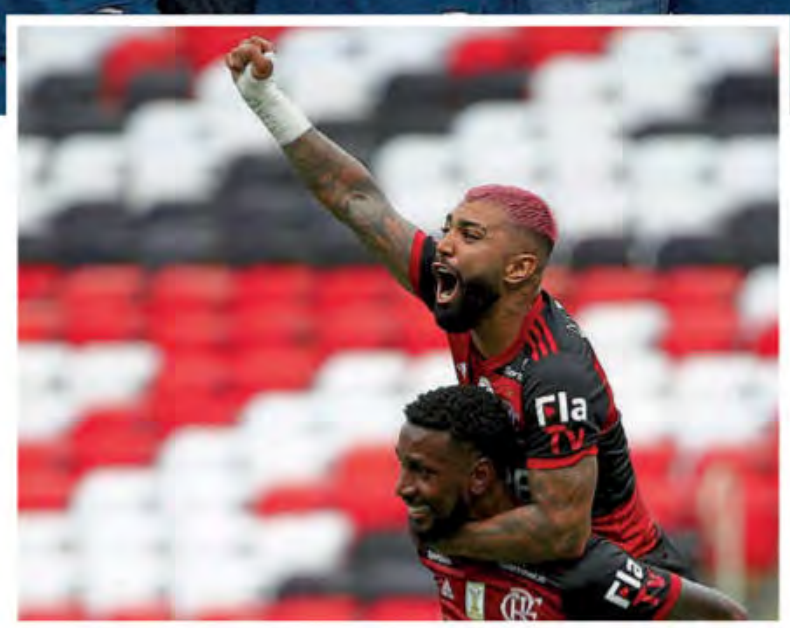
Rogerio Ceni...the legendary keeper and title-winning coach celebrates with his players

consecutive wins that took them to the brink of the title.

Flamengo had replaced the all-conquering Portuguese Jorge Jesus with former Pep Guardiola assistant Domenec Torrent from Spain. After a couple of heavy defeats he was perhaps harshly sacked early in November, and replaced by Rogerio Ceni. Things got worse. Flamengo were bundled out of the domestic cup and the Copa Libertadores, going out to a vastly inferior Racing from Argentina. These were huge blows and put Ceni under immediate pressure. But, in terms of the league title defence, it surely worked in Flamengo's favour.

Neither Torrent nor Ceni were able to find a definitive solution to the team's biggest issue: the inability to replace Spanish centre back Pablo Mari, who had been snapped up by Arsenal after being so important to the 2019 triumphs. He had organised the high defensive line, so important to the team of Jorge Jesus. Without him, Flamengo kept shipping goals – their defensive record was the worst of any champion since the league format was adopted. But their attacking resources tipped the balance.

The "famous four" from 2019 were still in harness – the strike duo of Gabriel Barbosa and the wonderfully versatile Bruno Henrique, plus the creative guile of attacking midfielders Everton Ribeiro and Giorgian De Arrascaeta. They were still supported by the thrusting midfield play of Gerson. And there was more. Not all of the attacking reinforcements came off. Some seemed surplus to requirements. But centre-forward Pedro, signed from Fiorentina, was a smash success, weighing in with important goals and subtle penalty area contributions. He often had to



Star men...Gerson lifts top goalscorer Gabriel Barbosa

be content with a place on the bench. Not trusting his defence, Ceni was very reluctant to select Gabriel and Pedro together, but it meant that Flamengo could always introduce a potent goal threat in the second half.

Flamengo's attack won the title. But only because Inter faltered at the last – through a combination of exhaustion, the pressures of chasing a first league title since 1979 and, perhaps inner doubts that they were good enough to do it. They lost at home to lowly Sport. And then, in the penultimate round, they visited Flamengo. Inter were a point ahead. A win would give them the title. They went a goal up. They sat back. Flamengo equalised. Inter may have been unfortunate to have a man sent off, and Flamengo won 2-1, giving them a two-point lead going into the final round.

A win away to Sao Paulo would wrap up the title for Flamengo, but any other result would leave them vulnerable. Inter had a better goal difference, and were at home to Corinthians.

Flamengo went down 2-1, while Inter were being held. They had goals disallowed, a penalty taken away by VAR, they had hit the post and forced great saves from the Corinthians keeper. When the final whistle blew on the Flamengo match, Inter still had a couple of minutes to force home a title winner. In that time, while Flamengo players watched on their phones, Inter had a goal disallowed for a narrow offside and then, with the last kick of the championship, put a good chance just over the bar. It was all over – barring, of course, the minute dissection of all the key refereeing decisions. Some specialists thought that Inter's penalty should have stood. But they had been awarded some controversial penalties along the way, and one of the benefits of the league system is that there is time for errors to even out. And whatever else it was, the 2020 Brazilian Championship was an advert for the benefits of the league system.

Apart from Flamengo's triumph, there was more joy for Rio in the performance of Fluminense, who finished a surprise fifth – but despair for Vasco da Gama and Botafogo, the city's other two traditional powers, who were relegated (for the fourth and third time respectfully) along with Coritiba and Goias.

It is a bad time to go down. There are no more parachute payments for relegated teams, and the financial situation of both Rio teams, especially Botafogo, is alarming.

Some hope comes from Chapecoense, relegated for the first time in 2019, in what many saw as the start of a spiral of decline. Instead, they topped the table in a low-scoring second division and came straight back up. Promoted along with them are America of Belo Horizonte and Juventude from the south – two clubs who have yo-yoed in recent times – and with them, most interestingly, a first division debutant.

Cuiaba, in Brazil's largely rural centre-west region, was one of the more controversial host cities of the 2014 World Cup. The newly-built stadium could only play a limited role in Cuiaba's promotion campaign – the entire Brazilian season was played behind closed doors – but it has clearly given some kind of impetus to the rise of a club whose arrival in the top flight marks a fascinating moment.

Botafogo and Vasco now join Cruzeiro in the second division. The Belo Horizonte giants, relegated in 2019, brought in Luiz Felipe Scolari to coach the side. He managed to arrest a slide towards the third division, but parted company with the club when promotion became impossible. And so three of the 12 traditional giants from the southeast are now

Flamengo's defensive record was the worst of any champion since the Brazilian league format was adopted. But their attacking resources tipped the balance

Anxious wait...Flamengo players watch the conclusion to Internacional v Corinthians

outside the top flight. Meanwhile, all four clubs from the northeast avoided the drop – Ceara in mid-table, Bahia, Sport and Fortaleza by the skin of their teeth – meaning that with the entry of Cuiaba, the 2021 Brazilian Championship takes on more of a genuinely national aspect.

This is undoubtedly good news, even if it does mean more travelling around the giant country in the next league campaign – in the context of an insanely unforgiving calendar.

The belated end of the 2020 season brings no break, no holidays, no pre-season. Instead, there is the immediate start of the regional competitions, one for each of Brazil's 27 states, followed straight after by the 2021 league – which this year will be even harder to combine with the quest to win the Copa Libertadores.

Brazil's footballers could be forgiven for casting a wistful glance at the calendar and dreaming of the holidays that – hopefully – will come in December. Until then there is no pause for the Copa America and no pause for the Olympics – just football to be played and flights to catch.

Relegated...Rio giants Vasco da Gama (below) and Botafogo (bottom right)

Dejected...Internacional forward Joao Peglow

eyewitness

Ben Bocsak reports

IVORY COAST & MALI

Talent factory

2006 marked a significant turning point in the history of football in Ivory Coast. Having spent decades as relative minnows on the world scene, the West Africans began the year by reaching the final of the Africa Cup of Nations – losing on penalties to Egypt – before appearing at their first-ever World Cup in the summer. It was to be the first of three consecutive qualifications, before their crowning achievement in 2015: victory in the Africa Cup of Nations.

Subsequent failures to go beyond the AFCON quarter-finals, or reach Russia 2018, demonstrate just how much their unprecedented golden age owed to a superb generation of talent.

Yet, if it were not for the vision and innovation of a little-known Frenchman, those stars may not have emerged, and the golden years would never have happened.

Diadie Samassekou... JMG Academy graduate celebrates scoring for Mali at the Under-20 World Cup in 2015

In the 1990s Jean-Marc Guillou, a former France international, had grown disillusioned with the European game. After a few short stints as a coach in France, he sought to revolutionise academy coaching, but found his efforts scuppered in the rigidly controlled European scene.

Guillou needed a new environment. Africa was just starting to emerge on the world scene, with Roger Milla and George Weah growing into icons, and Guillou was one of the first to realise the untapped potential on the continent. In 1994, he birthed what is known today as the JMG Academy in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast.

"Jean-Marc prepared for six years," Mamadou Wad, JMG's administrator remembers. "We organised trials across Ivory Coast, checked the kids for their heights and weight to make sure they were the right age and watched them play."

To find players, Guillou travelled across Ivory Coast observing games with a watchful eye for talent. He casted calls for trials on local radio stations, on posters and on television. Thousands flocked to prove themselves in front of the renowned Frenchman.

Some of the very first players discovered by Guillou included Kolo Toure, Boubacar Barry and Didier Zokora, but that was just the start. Yaya Toure, Salomon Kalou, Gervinho, Emmanuel Eboue and Siaka Tiene all began their careers under the stewardship of Jean-Marc Guillou, accounting for eight of the ten most-capped players in Ivory Coast's history.

Despite the plethora of stars, a sense of loss lingers over the legacy of Guillou's generation. There is a consensus around the world that Ivory Coast of the 2000s should have achieved more. But the blame does not lie with JMG, according to Wad.

"I feel that the federation of Ivory Coast could have managed the group better. This team should not have won just one Africa Cup of Nations, it could have been two or three."

Having grown disillusioned with his project in Ivory Coast in 2007, Guillou moved his main base to Bamako in Mali.

Here things are different. "We are trying to work closely with the federation," Mamadou Wad says. "We don't want to make the same error as we did in Ivory Coast."

After a little over a decade of work in Bamako, the same formula of player development is beginning to form in Malian football as it did in Ivory Coast. Yves Bissouma, Amadou Haidara, Diadie Samassekou and Mohamed Camara may not be household names just yet, but they soon will be.

Between 2015 and 2019, Mali were one of the most consistent international teams at youth level. In 2015, the country's Under-17s won the first of two back-to-back Africa Cup of Nations, then followed it up by reaching the World Cup final. The Under-20s came third at the World Cup in the same year, then won the AFCON in 2019.

JMG graduates have been at the forefront of Mali's success. In every generation there were at least three or four players from the academy in the starting line-up, and those who moved

Golden generation... two JMG academy graduates, Yaya Toure and Salomon Kalou, at the 2014 World Cup with Didier Drogba

African champions... Yaya Toure lifts the 2015 AFCON trophy

to Europe on the back of impressive tournament performances have mostly been the youngsters who honed their skills with Jean-Marc Guillou.

Salzburg has been the most common destination. Samassekou, Haidara and Camara were all snapped up by the Austrian giants, and in January Red Bull purchased a further three graduates from JMG.

But there are close links in France too, and some have even ventured as far as Ukraine and Russia to play professionally.

"I am convinced we will have the same success as we did in Ivory Coast," Wad says. "I think Mali could be one of the best teams in Africa for the next 15 years."

It is a bold statement. But given JMG's record with Ivory Coast, it is hard to dispute.

A total of nine graduates from the academy made it to Mali's 2019 AFCON squad, showing Guillou's influence in the senior set-up.

Between 2019 and 2020, Mali lost just twice. Once to AFCON finalists Senegal and the other to a far more experienced Ivory Coast team.

Impressively, Mali's team is still growing. The last senior squad in November had an average age of 24.86, with 15 of the players aged 25 or younger. And with more and more Malians embarking on European adventures that number could climb even higher.

For the very first time in the country's history, the 2022 World Cup looks like a tangible possibility rather than a fictional dream.

A group of Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda seems winnable on paper, and then only a play-off game will await to determine Mali's place at the tournament.

Even the play-offs would be an historic landmark for the Malians who have never come as close to making it to the competition. Faltering at that hurdle would not constitute a failure for such a young team. Rather it would provide an experience to grow from and to build on a potential qualification for the 2026 World Cup in North America, where the number of African participants will increase from five to nine.

It is no coincidence Mali's rise began at the same time as Guillou's arrival in Bamako. Like in Ivory Coast, he has ignited a football revolution in the country.

Not a single academy has come close to matching Guillou's achievement in Africa. His success is based on two factors. Firstly, identifying talent: "He told me: 'I look for a player who has a special quality that no other player has. This can be mental, technical or physical quality," explains Wad. "Never look at players with preconceived ideas; when you bring them into the academy, the programme is good enough to complement their natural qualities and teach them the areas where they lack."

Mastermind... Jean-Marc Guillou

Young talents... Yves Bissouma, Amadou Haidara and others at the JMG academy in Mali

And once the players arrive in the academy?

"His philosophy is that first and foremost the ball must be a player's friend. It must become as natural to his players as using their left and right legs when they move."

Eight of the ten most-capped players in Ivory Coast's history began their careers under the stewardship of Jean-Marc Guillou

To achieve this, Guillou has implemented some unique methods. At JMG, the players play with their bare feet until the age of 15 and 16 in order to be able to "grasp" the ball better. They have to earn their boots by proving their technical ability first.

Often, they compete against teams who are wearing boots to force the players to pass the ball and move it as quickly as possible. Guillou also forces his younger players to play against older, more physically advanced players in order to help them adjust better to adult football and the physically demanding European leagues.

Talent factory... JMG's main base moved from Ivory Coast to Mali in 2007

The Frenchman cites South America and the Copacabana as his inspiration for his methods. After all, Brazil produce the most professional footballers per capita.

Technical emphasis is at the forefront of the training sessions. You can see the influence of that on JMG's best players. Take Yves Bissouma as an example; his technical excellence has attracted the attention of clubs like Liverpool and Real Madrid and has made him thrive in the Premier League at Brighton & Hove Albion.

As a result of this technical emphasis, Guillou's teams play possession-based football, with Barcelona one of the biggest inspirations.

And that philosophy is rubbing off on Mali too thanks to better communication between the Malian federation and JMG.

Since the last decade, the national team has started to embrace possession-based football. Haidara's recent goal against Angola was a great example of Guillou's ideal foundations coming to fruition: every outfield player had a touch in a move of almost 20 passes, before the ball was thumped into the back of the net.

Wad says unlike in the Ivory Coast, JMG has started to influence other academies who are "copying" Guillou's methods which has also built on JMG's foundations in the country. Stars like El Bilal Toure, Moussa Djenepo and Sekou Koita are all excelling at elite levels in Europe having been spotted outside of JMG.

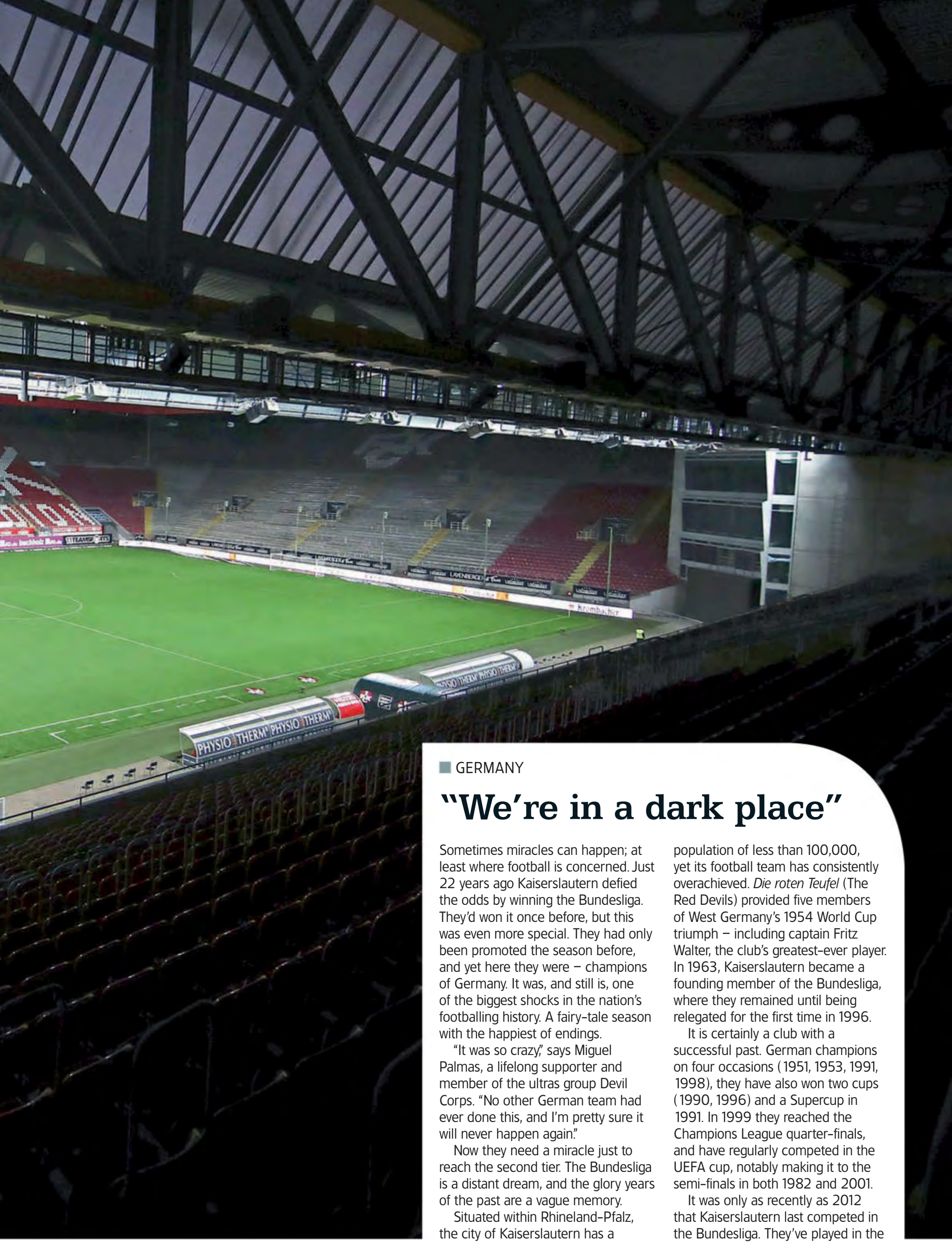
"The kids are starting to play on the streets younger now. Before it was hard to find even five good players and now it is difficult to take less than fifteen into the academy," Mamadou Wad concludes optimistically about the future.

If Wad is to be believed, the best is yet to come.

eye witness

Reiss Tigwell reports

The Fritz-Walter-Stadion...home of Kaiserslautern



GERMANY

"We're in a dark place"

Sometimes miracles can happen; at least where football is concerned. Just 22 years ago Kaiserslautern defied the odds by winning the Bundesliga. They'd won it once before, but this was even more special. They had only been promoted the season before, and yet here they were – champions of Germany. It was, and still is, one of the biggest shocks in the nation's footballing history. A fairy-tale season with the happiest of endings.

"It was so crazy," says Miguel Palmas, a lifelong supporter and member of the ultras group Devil Corps. "No other German team had ever done this, and I'm pretty sure it will never happen again."

Now they need a miracle just to reach the second tier. The Bundesliga is a distant dream, and the glory years of the past are a vague memory.

Situated within Rhineland-Pfalz, the city of Kaiserslautern has a population of less than 100,000, yet its football team has consistently overachieved. *Die roten Teufel* (The Red Devils) provided five members of West Germany's 1954 World Cup triumph – including captain Fritz Walter, the club's greatest-ever player. In 1963, Kaiserslautern became a founding member of the Bundesliga, where they remained until being relegated for the first time in 1996.

It is certainly a club with a successful past. German champions on four occasions (1951, 1953, 1991, 1998), they have also won two cups (1990, 1996) and a Supercup in 1991. In 1999 they reached the Champions League quarter-finals, and have regularly competed in the UEFA cup, notably making it to the semi-finals in both 1982 and 2001.

It was only as recently as 2012 that Kaiserslautern last competed in the Bundesliga. They've played in the

league for 44 out of its 58 seasons. But a lot has changed since then; their role as a top-flight club has almost been forgotten. Few have fallen quite like Kaiserslautern.

Die roten Teufel now find themselves in the lower reaches of German football, competing in the third tier, where they've been since 2018, desperately trying to keep their heads above water. In this league, Kaiserslautern are giants. Winning is paramount. Pre-pandemic average attendances of more than 20,000 were comfortably the highest, and more than double the league average of just over 8,000.

At the end of February they were 15th, one point above the relegation zone, having won just once in 2021. Their Fritz-Walter-Stadion, one of the country's largest grounds outside the Bundesliga, had only hosted one league victory all season.

Relegation would mean not only the fourth division, but regional football, where many are semi-professional. Which prompts two simple questions: Where did it all go wrong? And how?

When things don't go according to plan the first thing most think of is, who is responsible? Who is to blame? There must be someone, something. Each fan has their own unique perspective, but most agree that those in positions of power at the club are responsible for the mess. For Miguel, it can all be traced back to one particular match.

"Quarter-final. Champions League. Bayern Munich. 1999," says Miguel, a tall, muscular, larger than life character. "After this, it all went pear-shaped. They beat us heavily. We didn't stand a chance. But we earned a lot of money from the competition and we went all in."

The side's 6-0 aggregate defeat had prompted the board to make a series of financial gambles far beyond the club's means – a decision that would later have serious consequences. 1998 World Cup winner Youri Djorkaeff arrived from Inter, while Mario Basler joined from Bayern on a lucrative contract. But the risks didn't work. At least not in the way it was hoped, and the funds dried up.

Champions League... Kaiserslautern, featuring a young Michael Ballack, line up for their 1999 quarter-final with Bayern Munich

Although Kaiserslautern went on to reach the UEFA Cup semi-final two years later – only to be denied a chance to face Liverpool in the final by Alaves – their league position deteriorated significantly within a short space of time. They'd gone from champions in 1998, to a bottom-half side in 2005, before relegation came in 2006.

"After the money was gone it all went wrong," Miguel continues. "You can say that after that Bayern game you had some ups, but it all went steadily downhill. We are actually a really great club, but over time those who have run it have made some really bad choices."

Those at boardroom level and politicians had fought tooth and nail to bring the World Cup to Kaiserslautern, and in 2002 their dream became a reality. Over the following three years the Fritz-Walter-Stadion was renovated and turned into a near 50,000-seater in preparation for the 2006 tournament.

However, hosting the World Cup is one thing, paying for it another.

It was supposed to benefit both city and region, but did neither. Instead, it cost the club an extortionate amount, and despite talk of financial support from the region, the club were left to foot most of the bill. For Miguel, it was "one of the last nails in the coffin."

Kaiserslautern found themselves engulfed in a financial crisis so severe

Crisis... Kaiserslautern are in a relegation battle

Marquee signing... World Cup winner Youri Djorkaeff celebrates scoring against Alaves in the 2001 UEFA Cup semi-final

Loyal fans...before COVID they had the highest 3. Liga attendance

that they were forced to sell their stadium rights to a consortium in 2003 – before the World Cup had even begun, in an attempt to ease bankruptcy fears.

"With the knowledge of today, hosting the World Cup was the worst thing that could have happened to us," Miguel says.

The city demanded annual rents of €3.2 million – a comfortable price for a Bundesliga club. TV rights alone would easily pay the fee. The problem is that since 2006, Kaiserslautern have only spent two seasons in the Bundesliga.

"How can we pay that? When they drew up the contract [stadium rent], they thought Kaiserslautern would play forever in the Bundesliga," he says passionately. "We have had to sell our stars players, one by one". A long list follows, Miroslav Klose the undisputed pick of the bunch. Getting rid of them was the only option, he tells *World Soccer*. "It's a very difficult situation."

Although rents have reduced slightly in recent years, it hasn't helped solve the club's financial burden. Being on the verge of bankruptcy has become commonplace. Discussions to buy back the stadium are on-going, with potential funding from regional investors – but nothing has materialised so far.

"What we are paying [stadium rent] might not seem a lot, but to a club in the third division with very little money at the moment, it's a significant sum," says Miguel. "Right now, we have nothing. No spectators and very little revenue.

"I think we can only succeed if we buy the stadium back. They never had a Plan B and now here we are suffering. With the chairman and the board that are there now...the problems are getting worse."

What then, if the club were to be relegated again? "Honestly for me I would appreciate it, and I am not joking," he says. "We have sold our soul."

How about the fans? "We are very loyal. This is one of the big things here. You don't need a lot here to make people happy. We don't need stars or any of this kind of thing. We celebrate a throw-in like Bayern Munich celebrate a German championship. This part of Germany is very down to earth and that's how we play football. This club is like a family. If we fall in love with you, you're one of us.

"But will it be the end for the club if we go down? Never. Never, ever. We're in a dark place right now but there is so much love and passion around this club. I am pretty sure we will sort things out. Somehow. Somewhere."

The club can, however, rely on its academy, which has continued to produce talent. Former PSG and now Eintracht Frankfurt star Kevin Trapp, RB Leipzig's Willi Orban, and Leeds United's Robin Koch to name a few.

"We always bring fantastic young guys through, and this has helped us out. It's one of the last financial assets we have."

> "I applaud every young person in the stadium whenever I go because they have never seen any success whatsoever. They only see rubbish football"
>
> **Miguel Palmas, lifelong Kaiserslautern fan**

But even here there have been problems over the years, most notably with the curious case of academy product Weston McKennie, who spent three years at the club while his father was stationed at the nearby Ramstein Air Base.

"They didn't want to pay out for an academy place for him. Three meals a day, a place to sleep and an education in school – that's it. So he went back to the USA. Then he goes to Schalke and now he's at Juventus! This is the kind of thing that we deal with. It's always short-term, never long-term. They see the talent, but they don't want to act because they don't know how things are going to be tomorrow."

While there is always hope that the club could perhaps one day return to its former glory days, most understandably feel that those days are long gone, and are unlikely to ever return. "No, that was a fairy tale, man," says Miguel. "Those days are no more. I'm not a religious person but I'm telling you since we won the Bundesliga in 1998, somebody sold their soul. Since then, we are suffering.

"It's like a bad Hollywood movie. But no, honestly, we cannot ever get back there. There are so many huge clubs now in the Bundesliga. I still applaud every young person in the stadium whenever I go because they have never seen any success whatsoever. They only see rubbish football."

Things may be bleak for Kaiserslautern at the moment, but it's a football club that means so much to so many. The working-class culture, the passion, and the sense of togetherness in good times and bad.

"Kaiserslautern means everything to me," Miguel says. "It has defined me since I was a little kid. It still gives me chills when I go there. I grew up seeing players with less ability than their opponent on the pitch and winning the game. Not once, twice, but on a regular basis. We might be a small club, but we have triumphed so many times.

"We forget where we are. We forget what made us so strong. Holding together and co-operating with one another. There are really not many up sides here at the moment. But you don't choose your club, it chooses you, eh?" he says with a smile.

eyewitness

Henry Flynn reports

ESTONIA

Homegrown heroes

For national champions FC Flora, there's more to football than just winning

The year was nearing its end and triumphant names around Europe had already lifted their silverware. But in Estonia's capital Tallinn, celebrations were just underway. FC Flora, the country's most successful club, had achieved something unique.

In 2020, Flora did things their way. In pursuit of a 13th Meistriliiga trophy, they placed all their trust in homegrown players. It paid off too, as they won their second consecutive league championship. But this was no one-off experiment. By investing in local talent each year, Flora hope to bring about a new dawn in Estonian football.

To put their methods into perspective, champions from lesser-populated European nations such as Liechtenstein and Luxembourg regularly participate in the fluid exchange of players across Europe. Even teams further down the Estonian first division are plugged into the international transfer market, hoping to gain a competitive edge.

Yet, while the option remains open, Flora – sometimes nicknamed *Cacti* after their green and white colours – have chosen to abandon the norm, although some of their own budding stars have moved abroad.

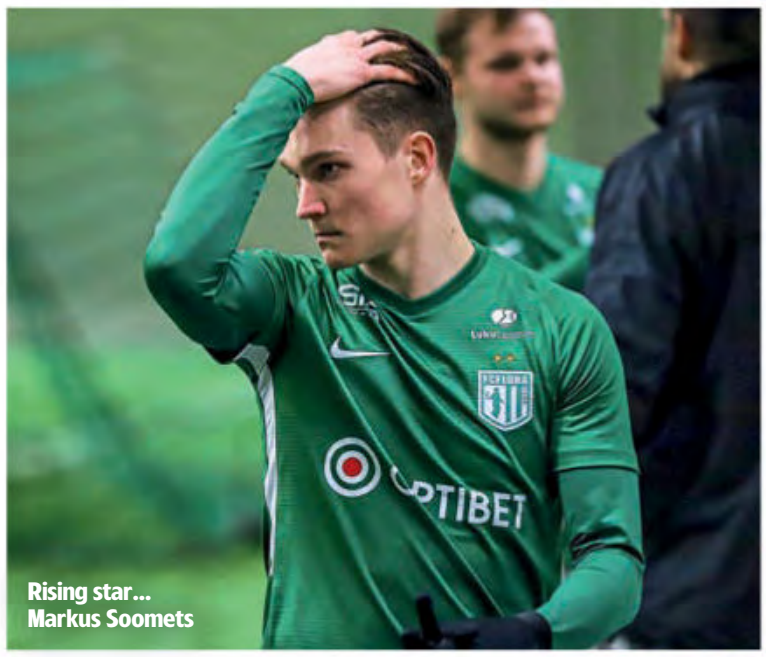
"It's not so interesting for us to become successful by bringing ready and prepared players to Estonia," says Pelle Pohlak, the club's president behind this fresh approach.

"By educating, scouting and developing local players we can really put our football knowledge and sportive abilities to the test."

Nurturing from within is nothing new and many teams pride themselves on their blooming academies. Flora, however, are still fine-tuning their ideas.

Until recently, the side mainly enlisted non-native players from Eastern Europe and nearby Finland. The latest example was Anselmi Nurmela, a Finnish defender who eventually returned home after two years of service.

"We practised foreign recruitment years ago and would probably do it again as an exception if we were in a critical situation," adds Pohlak.



Rising star... Markus Soomets

"When we need to cover a position, we look inside the club for starters, then elsewhere in Estonia. If we still haven't found a solution, we might look abroad."

Last season, Tallinn-born striker Rauno Sappinen led the way for Jurgen Henn's team, scoring 26 goals in 28 league games in a campaign that saw them lose just once. This time they are looking to win a third successive title for the first time in almost two decades.

All is rosy, or so it appears. Results are positive, communication between players and staff is straightforward and Flora – a family club in the most traditional sense – are often crowned champions towards the end of each calendar year.

Yet, this self-sufficient, seemingly resourceful model has its drawbacks, according to Trevor Elhi, a full-back for city-sharers Levadia Tallinn.

"I've been at a club where almost all the players came from the same country," the 27-year-old says, reflecting on his experiences in football.

"I think that different cultures and nationalities are beneficial to a team because everyone brings their differences which can be combined to form a strong unit.

"For them, all the players had to be the same, like the same things, do the same things. It was a nightmare."

Whether onlookers endorse Flora's ways or not, nobody can doubt their impact on the national team. Estonia – currently outside the top 100 in the world rankings – are mainly comprised of Flora players who determine much of their success.

Champions...Flora began their title defence at the start of March

Any strides forward would be historic. Estonia haven't competed in a worldwide football tournament for nearly 100 years; their last appearance was at the Paris Olympic Games in 1924 before their integration into the Soviet Union.

Nowadays, they understandably struggle against the top nations but have at least produced some notable exports. Their captain Ragnar Klavan, a former Flora player, went for trials at Ajax and Real Sociedad as a teenager and has since enjoyed a rewarding career, while ex-goalkeeper Mart Poom was a regular for Derby County around the turn of the century.

Making an impression hasn't come easy, though. 2021 marks Estonia's 30th year of independence, and establishing a distinct football heritage doesn't happen overnight.

Snow-covered pitches, sub-zero temperatures and a shortage of

> "When we need to cover a position, we look inside the club for starters, then elsewhere in Estonia. If we still haven't found a solution, we might look abroad"
>
> **Pelle Pohlak, Flora's club president**

quality resources have made matters especially tricky, with indoor pitches only becoming common in the last ten years.

But there has been an improvement, and Pelle's father Aivar Pohlak has been a key cog in dragging the sport from obscurity to respectability as president of the Estonian Football Association.

Thanks largely to him, the game is now more advanced. As for what comes next, Flora's focus on the next generation will be key.

"Before we had only one youth co-ordinator who worked part-time," Flora's assistant coach Norbert Hurt explains. "Now our youth department is composed of a head of youth, head of youth administration and three methodological coaches.

"We have built a training model, a game model and game principles to nurture the players.

"We have also begun monthly talent identification meetings to discuss the players' development."

Improved infrastructure and refined thinking at the top level have certainly benefitted Markus Soomets who, having just turned 21, aims to set a new standard for club and country from the centre of the pitch.

The midfielder has high hopes but is not in a hurry. He spent a year in Sampdoria's academy in 2018-19, but returned to his home country to join a forward-thinking institution. Now, he believes that he is in the right place to improve, which in itself shows how far the national set-up has come.

"One of the first things I noticed about Flora is that they have excellent facilities. They have contributed a lot to my development as a player," says Soomets.

"My targets are to reach the top three leagues within five years and to represent my national team to the best of my ability.

"I want to set an example and to be a role model to other aspiring football players. I will pursue my goal to be one of the greatest players in my country."

Estonia's ambitions are big, but becoming a global force remains a tall order and should not mark their progress.

Instead, a population of under 1.5 million people striving to make the most of their resources is what merits attention. What Estonia lack in football pedigree, they make up for in enterprise.

Award-winning... assistant coach Norbert Hurt presents Soomets with his Best Young Player award

Face to face: Pelle Pohlak

Club president... Pelle Pohlak

What led to Flora becoming the most successful club in Estonia?
I would come up with three aspects. Firstly, we have created an attractive environment for players to be part of. Secondly, we choose players by weighing up both their skills and personal characteristics. Finally, we possess a clear sporting vision. This helps us to reach our goals.

How was your philosophy born?
At one point, we understood that there was enough talent in Estonia. You just had to be able to see it and work with it. This is probably the same way everywhere. It's interesting to give young people like myself a chance by supporting them in realising their goals. Last year we had one of the youngest teams in the Europa League play-offs. As for other personnel, the head coach was 33, our assistant coaches were 33, 28 and 26 and our sports director was 37.

Needless to say, we consider our way of doing things very important as it helps to make our world richer and more value-based. We hope to provide a club image that followers and like-minded people can identify with. If we were only focused on becoming successful and didn't act on our own beliefs, we would only be providing entertainment. Yet, if we can manage to be successful another way, it has a significance of its own.

We don't just want to win; we want more.

Do you think Flora's current players have the potential to make an impact on the European stage?
We try to become stronger step by step. We have to develop further in how we train, how we play games and how we develop players. We are also trying to bring through players capable of playing at an even higher level. We strive to be competitive in European club competitions and hopefully, this on-going process will get us there. Last season, we peaked in the play-offs of the Europa League.

How close is the connection between Flora and the national team?
Since we mainly work with Estonian players who must have the potential to represent their country, we definitely play our part in the national team's success on a sporting level. In most cases, we remain in contact with players even after they have left Flora to move abroad. We try to stay in touch and support them, even if their only real connection to Estonian football is through the national team.

Europa League... Flora hosted Eintracht Frankfurt in 2019, losing 4-2 on aggregate

Basketball and ice hockey are very popular in Estonia, but what attention do football and Flora attract?
Ice hockey was more popular in Estonia before the Second World War. Today, football shares the status of basketball in the popularity rankings. However, the advantage football has is its worldwide sporting appeal. This impacts Estonia too. In essence, today's youngsters perceive football as an actual profession. Estonia's club football has now developed far beyond basketball's and this also applies to Flora. People have noticed us because we aim to be successful by developing local players and because we take our work seriously. We believe that entertainment is not all there is to sport and football. It is only a part of it. To us, it seems people understand the meaning of this attitude.

> "We don't just want to win; we want more"

How does Flora engage supporters of all different ages and backgrounds?
Like all other first division clubs, Flora has a community development officer who is in charge of engaging the supporters. This project is co-financed by UEFA and the Estonian FA. In the project's first year, we saw a significant rise in club communities and match spectators. Unfortunately, the second year was affected by the pandemic. At Flora, we have two approaches to the community. First and foremost, we strive to be a family-based club with nearly 1,000 youth players. After that, we try to connect to others who can identify with our exact methods. Perhaps you could call it cultural sensitivity. Our club has quite a lot of followers from abroad as a result.

Does the club have any other traditions or values?
In my opinion, 30 years of history is too little time for traditions to be born, so I think the cultural aspects I mentioned previously are the most important values we carry. There's an image of an Ancient Greek goddess of spring and flowers on the club's logo. This influenced the club name and, among other things, symbolises our view that Estonian culture is not superior to others. Here, we champion the culture-based approach instead of the other ways of doing things.

World Soccer®

Global football intelligence

SERIOUS OPINION
Hard-hitting opinions from the game's most respected writers.

EXPERT ANALYSIS
Football's burning issues analysed by expert figures in the game.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS
Face to face with football's biggest names.

COMPETITION GUIDES
Essential previews of football's biggest tournaments.

TALENT SCOUT
Spotlight on the talented youngsters tipped for the top.

EYEWITNESS REPORTS
News and features from our global network of correspondents.

Subscribe to get your first 6 issues of World Soccer for just £15 saving 58% on the cover price (shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC421)

facebook.com/WorldSoccerMagazine

@worldsoccermag

www.worldsoccer.com

Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Luis Suarez

Time waits for ~~NO MAN~~ SOME MEN

Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Luis Suarez are proving that age is just a number…

Words: Nick Bidwell

It's a funny old thing, time; especially, it seems, during a global pandemic. Over the last year of lockdowns and travel bans, the days, weeks and months have merged into one indistinct blur; simultaneously dragging on endlessly yet passing with the blink of an eye.

Yet for some, time appears to have stood still – or at the very least slowed down. Take Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Luis Suarez. Both men have, at one point or another, been written off as yesterday's men, past their best. Yet here they are in 2021, aged 39 and 34 respectively, defying conventional football wisdom by leading their new sides in unlikely bids for league titles.

Put simply, Ibrahimovic and Suarez have elevated Milan and Atletico Madrid to new heights since arriving in 2020. Zlatan returned to the San Siro at the start of the year and struck 20 Serie A goals in 24 games during the first 12 months, while Suarez went top of La Liga's scoring charts in February, less than sixth months after being cast out by Barcelona.

In no time at all, they have become talismans at their new clubs, setting the tone through copious amounts of will-to-win, attitude, adrenaline and passion. Talk about delving headfirst into the Peter Pan playbook; these two have no intention of growing old.

"LIONS DON'T COMPARE THEMSELVES WITH HUMANS"

Milan can only be delighted with the sustained bounce Zlatan has sparked since linking up for a second time with the *Rossoneri*. All the more so since it was certainly not a foregone conclusion that he would want to return. His first spell there (2010-12) had ended in a storm of acrimony, Milan effectively selling him against his will to Paris Saint-Germain. A key figure in Milan's Serie A crown in 2010-11 and the winner of the national Golden Boot the following season, Zlatan felt, not without reason, that he had been slighted. One moment, Milan had deemed him un-transferable; the next, they were ushering him out the door.

Adriano Galliani, Milan's vice-president at the time, subsequently revealed that Zlatan was hived off to balance the books; Milan could not say no to PSG's €65 million offer for the Swede and Brazil centre-back Thiago Silva. "Ibrahimovic didn't want to leave Milan, but we had to sell him," Galliani told *France Football* in September 2012. "I promised him he would stay with us. I didn't keep my word."

Over the course of his career, Zlatan has normally been in charge of his destiny, packing up and moving on whenever the mood took him. His departure from Milan, however, was

one of the exceptions to that rule. Not that he would suffer any hangover in Paris. During his four seasons at the Parc des Princes, he proved the ultimate showman, accumulating goal upon goal (an incredible 156 in 180 official games), thrice topping the Ligue 1 scoring charts and thrilling the gallery every which way.

The main man in a PSG side that won four straight Ligue 1 titles, two French Cups and two League Cups, he regularly made the extraordinary commonplace. Few goals were mundane. Many, many more were works of art: the taekwondo-style flick, a long-range missile into the top corner, the scorpion goal, the cheeky chip from the most impossible of angles, the Panenka penalties.

Throughout his reign in Paris, he was brash, loud, self-opinionated and provocative. He was regularly dismissive of the French League, its fans and the nation as a whole. But the self-styled "God" could be a valuable team-mate too, setting up no end of goals for others, putting down markers in training with his full-on ferocity and doling out advice and encouragement. He particularly took PSG's young Italian midfielder Marco Verratti under his wing.

"I came like a king and left like a legend," he roared on social media when announcing the end of his Parisian odyssey in May 2016. Critics, inevitably, were quick to point to his lack of success with PSG on the Champions League stage (four quarter-final eliminations). However in terms of total impact on the French game, his contribution was remarkable indeed. "Ibra gives off a unique intensity," commented former PSG skipper and coach Luis Fernandez. "It's because of him that people buy their

> "I'd had years of everybody in England saying I wasn't good enough and all this bulls***. I like those things because they trigger me"
>
> **Ibrahimovic on joining Manchester United**

There and back again...Ibrahimovic has changed clubs four times in the last decade, but not his goal celebration

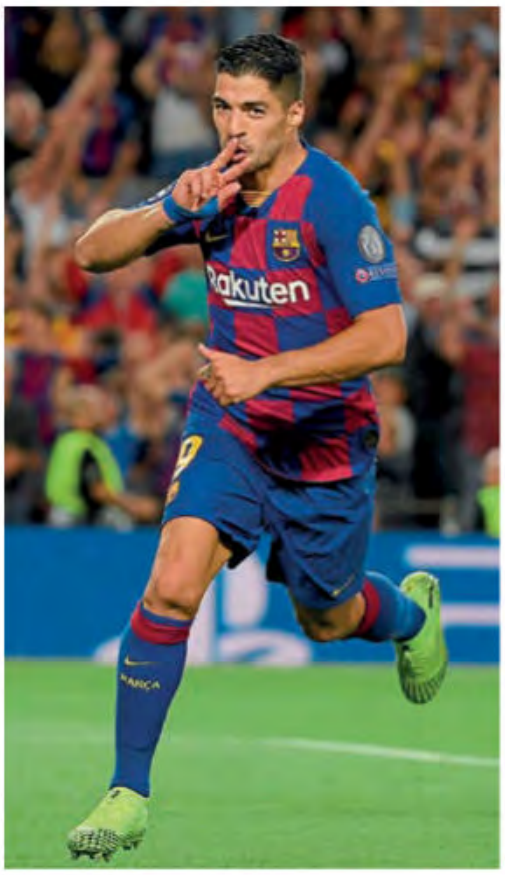
season tickets and TV subscriptions."

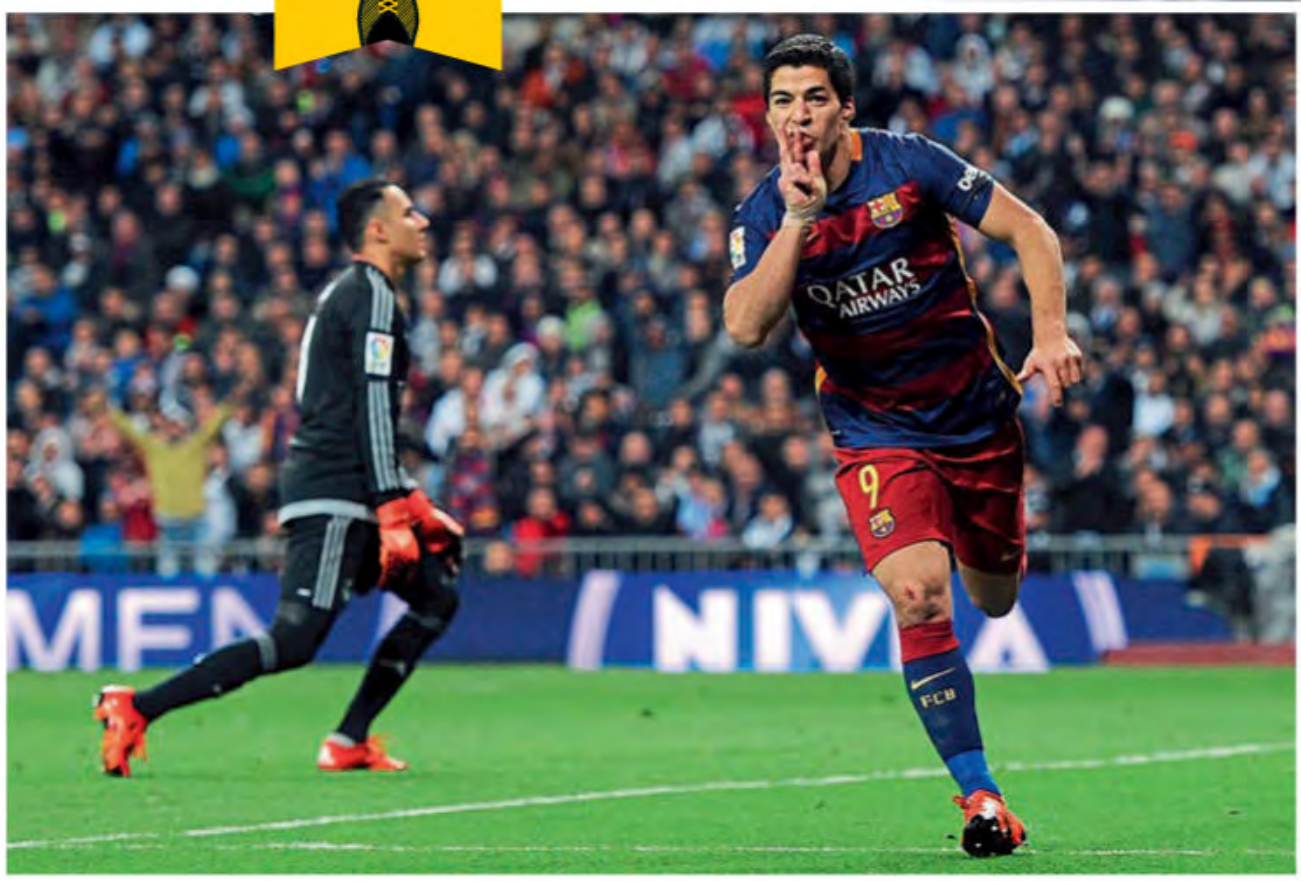
For someone of his ego and love of a challenge, a transfer to the Premier League was always on the cards. In July 2016, the then-34-year-old signed on the dotted line for Manchester United. As usual, the need to prove his critics wrong was his principle source of motivation. Up until this point, many English journalists and pundits had often labelled him an inconsistent prima donna. "I'd had years of everybody in England saying I wasn't good enough and all this bulls****," he declared on his arrival. "I like those things because they trigger me."

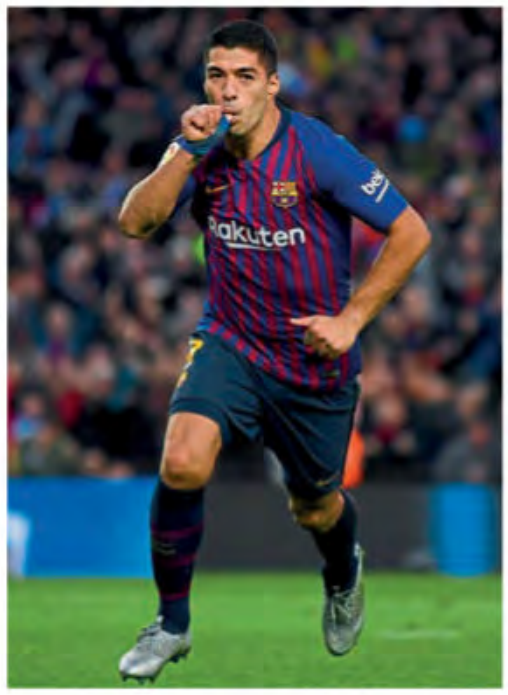
At first, his new life as a Red Devil went entirely to plan. Taking his cue from his headed winner in a pre-season Community Shield encounter with Leicester City, he went on to score 27 competitive goals in his first eight months, including a brace in United's 3-2 win over Southampton in the League Cup final. At this point, his UK detractors were in full retreat.

Yet sadly, all was to turn sour in April, when he snapped cruciate ligaments – the first major injury of his career – and was forced to sit out the club's Europa League final win against Ajax. He returned to the fray seven months later, but struggling for full fitness, started only one Premier League game in his second season at Old Trafford before terminating his contract in March 2018.

Next stop LA Galaxy, where he immediately launched into one of his trademark manifestos. "I've travelled around like Napoleon, conquering







El Pistolero... **Suarez's trademark celebration has been a familiar sight in Spain since 2014**

every country I've set foot in. Now, I'll maybe do what Napoleon couldn't do and cross the Atlantic to conquer the United States." A double strike on his debut – as a substitute in a comeback win over crosstown rivals Los Angeles FC – made for the perfect start in Galaxy colours. In a season-and-a-half at the club, he racked up an enviable 53 MLS goals in 58 appearances.

Just one problem: Americans only have scant regard for the non-victorious and Zlatan's Galaxy singularly failed to bring home the bacon, missing out on the play-offs in 2018 and eliminated in the Conference semi-finals the following campaign.

Cue his return to Europe for a second spin around the Milan block. "I've come back to Italy to finish my career at a big club," he explained to *Sportweek* magazine. "It was too easy to do this in America."

"THEY TOLD ME THAT I WAS OLD... THAT'S WHAT I DID NOT LIKE"

While Zlatan was exploring the world, Luis Suarez spent most of his six years at Barcelona on top of it. To all intents and purposes, this was a marriage made in heaven: Barca provided the prestigious setting, a culture of winning and a Dream Team of colleagues; Suarez took on the role of line-leader supreme, offering aggression, energy and bite – thankfully not literally this time.

His unselfishness blended perfectly with Neymar's dribbling, Andres Iniesta's playmaking and Lionel Messi's, well, Messi-ing. His finishing, often cited as a weakness during his early Anfield years, became ruthless. His numbers with the *Blaugrana* were to die for: an average tally of 33 goals per season and 198 in total – thus making him Barcelona's third-most prolific marksman of all-time – with 97 assists thrown in as well.

His stellar work in the 2015-16 season proved the high water mark, ending that campaign with an astonishing 59 goals, including 40 in La Liga, eight in the Champions League and another five in the Club World Cup. Enjoying the time of his life as a finisher, he pulled off a clean sweep of individual scoring awards: the Pichichi trophy as the top *goleador* in La Liga, the European Golden Shoe and the Club World Cup Golden Boot. It is the only time in the last 11 years that Messi has not ended the season as Barca's top scorer.

Ever the team man, Suarez also found time to record 24 assists, and he proved especially decisive in the last few weeks of Barcelona's triumphant La Liga campaign, notching 14 times in the last five games. In the ballot for the 2016 Ballon d'Or, he arguably deserved far more than fourth-place.

In fairness though, the Barcelona

vote was split three ways. Between them, Messi, Suarez and Neymar had racked up an astonishing 131 goals that season. It is hard to imagine three such talented players lining up together in the same team again; it is harder still to imagine them gelling together quite as perfectly as "MSN".

Suarez's arrival as the centre point between his two fellow South Americans made Barca's attack absolutely irrepressible, and a stream of silverware flowed in the direction of the Nou Camp during his first three years: the treble in 2014-15, a league-cup double a year later, then a third consecutive Copa del Rey in 2017, with a UEFA and Spanish Super Cup each thrown in. Even after Neymar's departure in 2017, Suarez won La Liga two more times, plus another Spanish Cup and Super Cup. Without doubt, Barca got their money's worth when they paid Liverpool £65 million for the Uruguayan in 2014.

As far as Suarez was concerned, he was living the dream. After all, this was the team he had long aspired to represent. In a social media video which went viral a couple of years ago, Suarez, then just a 17-year-old novice at Montevideo club Nacional, visibly became excited when a TV reporter asked him about his first visit to the Camp Nou back in 2004. "My girlfriend [Sofia, now his wife] lived in Barcelona and I'd gone to see her, said Suarez. "During the trip I went to a friendly between Catalonia and Argentina at the Camp Nou. It was spectacular. I was perched behind one of the goals. The stadium was so impressive."

So what a blow it must have been to suddenly be informed last summer that he was no longer part of Barca's plans. The rationale in the boardroom was that he was past his prime. The suits took note of his recent knee trouble and

The rationale in the [Barca] boardroom was that he was past his prime

diminishing goal returns (23 in 2018-19 and 21 last term) and saw yesterday's man. Other factors also came into the equation: cash-strapped Barca need to prune an out-of-control wage bill, and pure out-and-out politicking. Suarez just happened to be the best buddy of Barca icon Messi, who was fighting a war of influence with then-president Josep Maria Bartomeu. Splitting the pair made a certain Machiavellian sense to Bartomeu.

Suarez understandably felt aggrieved and disrespected. After all he had done for the club, he was now persona non grata, his contract ripped up a year before expiry. To add insult to injury, the news was broken to him via a phone call that lasted no longer than 60 seconds. Messi described the decision as "Madness".

But if Barca had lost faith in him, others definitely had not. For a moment, Italian champions Juventus looked set to bring him on board, but he was keen to stay in Spain. When Diego Simeone came calling, it seemed like a match made in heaven: born on opposite sides of River Plate, yet both well versed in the win-at-all-costs mentality that pervades both Uruguayan and Argentinian football.

Barcelona had agreed to rescind Suarez's contract on the condition that he wouldn't join a selection of clubs. Real Madrid were undoubtedly top of that list, yet their cross-city rivals were not. Only when Suarez's destination became apparent did Bartomeu realise his mistake. Lawyers were called in, and the clubs reached an agreement: there would be no up-front transfer fee, but a series of performance-related bonuses up to a maximum of €6m. Incidentally, the terms are almost identical to those agreed when David Villa made the same move ahead of the 2013-14 season, the last time Atleti won La Liga.

Right now, it looks like a steal. Energised and desperate for redemption, Suarez has not stopped scoring. The old dog still knows too many penalty-box tricks for most defenders. "When I spoke with Luis on the phone before he signed, I discovered a player with hunger and the desire to show it," declared Simeone. "This is what he is doing now."

In form...Suarez matched last season's La Liga tally in February

Prolific...Ibrahimovic was the first Serie A player to score double figures this season

THE LAST DANCE

Whether the two veterans can drag their sides over the finishing line, only time will tell. Whatever happens, their influence on this unique season has been undeniable.

> Suarez is the perfect lead wolf in an Atleti side packed with experience... [Zlatan] is the kingpin of a young Milan team that is still growing

In an Atleti side packed with experience and strong characters, Suarez is the perfect lead wolf, the missing element in a side that is always well-drilled and relentlessly difficult to play against, but can lack cutting edge. Perhaps he has always been the embodiment of Simeone's style, the perfect hybrid of *El Cholo's* most successful attackers: the needle and snarl of Diego Costa, plus the world-class match-winning ability of Antoine Griezmann. Around him, creative talents

continue to thrive: Joao Felix has improved significantly, while Marcos Llorente and Joaquin Correa are enjoying their best seasons, too.

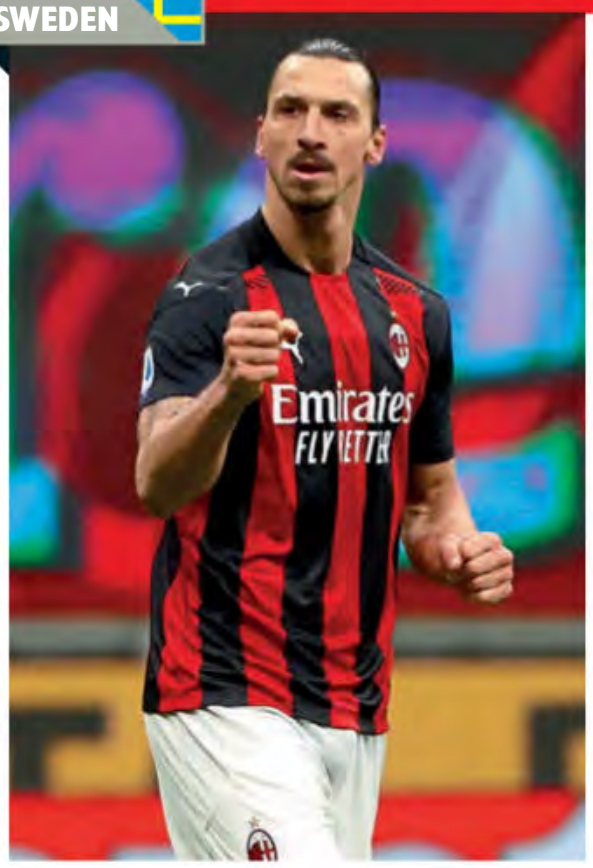
Zlatan's role within the Milan collective is markedly different, yet no less important. The Swedish superstar is the kingpin of a young Milan team that is still growing into the shoes of its illustrious predecessors. At times he cuts the figure of the Pied Piper, and certainly there is no better example for a young footballer to follow. Whatever his brash off-field persona suggests, he is a model professional, in outstanding physical condition in his 40th year. Whatever happens this season, the likes of Sandro Tonali, Theo Hernandez and Daniel Maldini will benefit immeasurably from having played with Zlatan. As long as he has ten other *Rossoneri* to do his running for him, the veteran is free to do what he does best: physically intimidate markers, find space and finish with athleticism, style and ruthlessness.

Eventually, time will return to normal for Ibrahimovic and Suarez. But not until they've had the last word. They refuse to go quietly.

the numbers game

Zlatan Ibrahimovic

SWEDEN



FIRST 30

Serie A matches for Milan

Goals	24
Assists	6

CAREER

Club & international record

Games	943
Goals	563

500

Zlatan scored the 500th goal of his club career in February

Luis Suarez

URUGUAY

FIRST 20

La Liga matches for Atletico

Goals	16
Assists	2

CAREER

Club & international record

Games	788
Goals	497

10

Suarez has hit double figures for goals in each of his last ten seasons

TOP SCORERS

Europe's top five leagues, 2010-2019

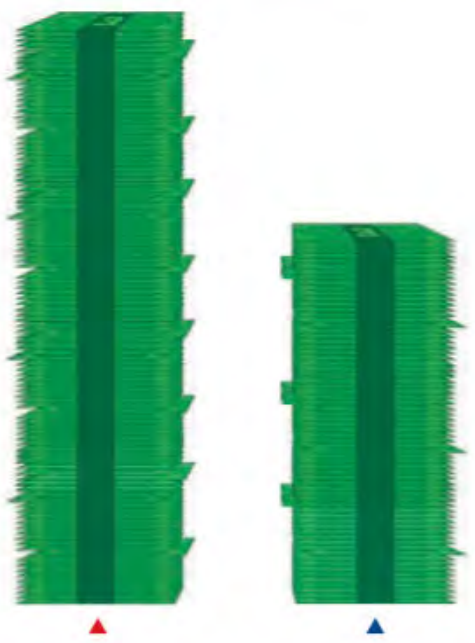
	Player	Goals
1	Lionel Messi	369
2	Cristiano Ronaldo	335
3	Edinson Cavani	223
4	Robert Lewandowski	221
5	Luis Suarez	207
6	Sergio Aguero	199
7	Gonzalo Higuain	191
8	Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang	183
9	Zlatan Ibrahimovic	177
10	Karim Benzema	155

TOP SCORERS

Champions League, all-time

	Player	Goals
1	Cristiano Ronaldo	134
2	Lionel Messi	119
3	Robert Lewandowski	72
9	Zlatan Ibrahimovic	48
33	Luis Suarez	26

TOTAL TRANSFER FEES



£152.19m
Ibrahimovic

£100.82m
Suarez

Statistics correct as of 05.03.2021

Words Nick Bidwell

Jules KOUNDE

Sevilla

In a sentence
Probably the most accomplished young centre-back in Europe at the moment; a rear-guard rock blessed with sensational offensive qualities as well.

What they say
"He's still young. It's up to him to keep up the momentum he has built with his club and the Under-21s. One day or another, he could be in a position to be called up to our senior team"

France coach Didier Deschamps

"Jules is a young player of great talent. Above and beyond his physical and technical attributes, he also has what I consider to be the most important thing of all at the highest level – the mind. That's the key. How he learns and develops"

Sevilla coach Julen Lopetegui

The story so far
Born in Paris on November 12, 1998, Kounde spent most of his formative years in south-west France. He joined his first football club – Fraternelle de Landiras – at the age of six, continuing his apprenticeship at other regional outfits, Cerons and La Brede.

Inducted into the academy of Ligue 1 giants Girondins de Bordeaux in 2013, aged 14, he skippered the club in every category from schoolboy to youth team, excelling in central defence. He made his senior debut for Bordeaux in January 2018 in a French Cup tie against US Granville. A week later, he appeared in his first Ligue 1 encounter, a 1-0 away win at Troyes.

Scouted by much-celebrated Sevilla recruitment chief Monchi, he was snapped up by the Andalusians in the summer of 2019 for €25 million. He helped Sevilla claim the Europa League last season and recently scored an incredible solo goal in a Copa del Rey semi-final against Barcelona.

Made his representative football bow with France's Under-18s in 2018, having had no interest in playing for Benin, the West African state his father hailed from.

The next step
Despite having a good three years left on his contract with Sevilla, it would be an amazing turn of events if this was not his last campaign at the Estadio Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan. His release clause is set at €80m and somehow, some way, a European big-hitter will come up with the necessary amount of bullion. Real Madrid, PSG and both Manchester clubs are thought to be in pole position.

Strengths
For someone relatively short (5ft 10ins), he wins the lion's share of his aerial challenges, relying on athleticism and timing to leap with the best. He is very comfortable on the ball, especially impressive in the precision of his long balls. Pacy, excellent in one-on-one duels and never one to dive in for tackles. Rarely commits fouls.

Weaknesses
He can still suffer from rare moments of inattention, to be a little careless.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT KOUNDE

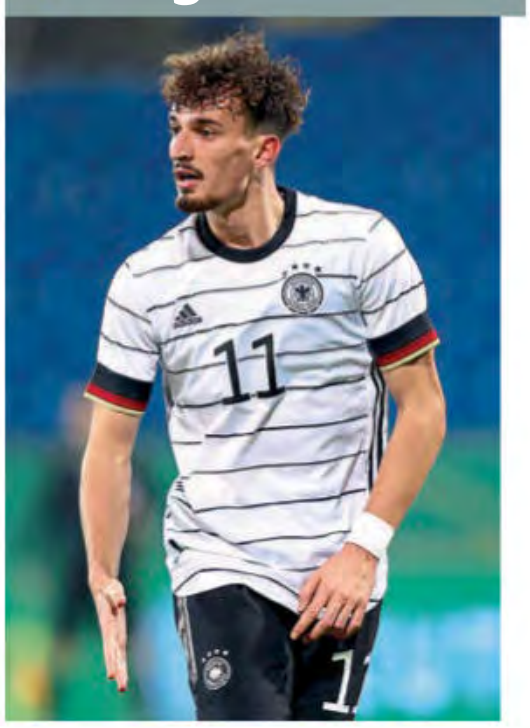
- He was the star turn when the Bordeaux Under-19s won the French championship in 2017.
- Prior to joining the Bordeaux academy, he had an unsuccessful trial with eastern French club Sochaux.
- Former Bordeaux head coach Jocelyn Gourvennec would only deploy Kounde at right-back, arguing he was too small to play at the heart of defence.

"One day or another, he could be in a position to be called up to our senior team"
France coach Didier Deschamps

Max AARONS

Norwich City
This attacking right-back is one of the hottest properties in the English game, desired by a string of leading Premier League clubs, as well as continental heavyweights Barcelona and Bayern. Norwich, currently among the English second-tier pacesetters, have thus far resisted all attempts to prise him away.

Mergim BERISHA



RB Salzburg
Rangy centre-forward of Kosovan lineage who has put himself in the shop window this term with his goalscoring feats for his club, notably a goal in each of Salzburg's Champions League group phase tussles with Bayern. In total he hit four goals in the Champions League last autumn, an impressive haul by anyone's standards.

Botond BALOGH

Parma
Promising Magyar centre-back who made his Serie A debut this season in a 2-2 draw with Inter at the San Siro. Parma coach Fabio Liverani shocked many by throwing the 18-year-old in at the deep end against the *Nerazzurri*, but the rookie was more than up to the job, steady and watchful in a back-three.

Dani DE WIT

AZ
Jong Oranje coach Erwin van de Looi will be keeping his fingers crossed that attacking midfielder De Wit will be fit in time for the European finals after suffering a nasty ankle injury late last year. De Wit, who piled up no fewer than ten goals in qualification, is a cornerstone of the Dutch XI, superb creatively between the lines and extremely clever in the timing of his forward runs.

Luka IVANUSEC

Dinamo Zagreb
Brilliantly versatile midfielder, capable of virtuosity as a No.10 or on either flank. Short of stature, but more than makes up for those lack of inches with his speed over the ground, sumptuous ball skills, strength in possession and flair for goals. Indeed, the Dinamo man hit seven in qualification for the young Croats. Has already won full caps for his country.

Boubacar KAMARA

Marseille
Equally productive as a centre-back or in a holding midfield role, the Marseille-born youngster looks set for an imminent big-money move away from the Stade Velodrome. Blessed with superior athleticism, vision and technical ability, he is often compared to the ex-Marseille, Milan and France great Marcel Desailly. Joined Marseille at the age of five.

Ladislav KREJCI

Sparta Prague
Tall, dominant stopper or defensive midfielder. He leads something of a dual-existence these days, normally occupying a holding role for his club, while lining up as a centre-back on the international front. He is the Under-21s' lucky charm, renowned for scoring from set-pieces, but discipline can be a problem – he has twice been red-carded for Sparta this season.

Aleksandr MAKSIMENKO

Spartak Moscow
Not for nothing is he rated among the most accomplished young goalkeepers in Eastern Europe. He seems to have all the bases of his craft covered: the shot-stopping, agility, commanding presence, effectiveness in one-on-one situations and a solid distribution game. This is his third season as a Spartak first-teamer after coming through the club's youth ranks.

Dennis MAN

Parma
The intelligent, tricky and goal-hungry right-winger was an integral part of the Romania side that reached the semi-finals of the 2019 European Under-21 finals in Italy. Prior to joining Parma in the January transfer window, he was unstoppable for FCSB in the first half of 2020-21, scoring 14 Romanian League goals and making another 12. Has been a senior international since 2018, playing six games.

Nuno MENDES

Sporting
After breaking into the Sporting side in the latter stages of last term, the 18-year-old left-sided defender or midfielder has gone from strength to strength, so much so that a queue of city slicker admirers – Manchester United, Liverpool, Real Madrid and Juventus – has formed outside the Jose Alvalade Stadium. A glorious combination of pace, selflessness and mesmerising street-footballer prowess.

Pedro PORRO

Sporting
Manchester City sent the classy midfielder to Portugal last summer in a two-year loan deal, but he is unlikely to return to the UK. The former Girona man has been playing out of his skin this term for Sporting and they have made it clear that they intend to trigger their option to buy (an eminently affordable €8.5m).

Gianluca SCAMACCA

Genoa
When the *Azzurrini* are in need of a goal, they generally look to striker Scamacca to come up trumps. Mature for his age and very composed in front of goal. Unusually for an Italian, he served part of his football apprenticeship in the Netherlands – first in PSV's academy, then on loan at PEC Zwolle. Now on loan at Genoa from Sassuolo.

Perr SCHUURS

Ajax
Despite rumours that Liverpool were monitoring him, Ajax's ball-playing centre-back wisely chose the continuity option, extending his contract with the Amsterdammers until 2025. This is only his first full season as an Ajax starter and his top priority must be to fully establish himself in the Ajax scheme of things.

Andreas Skov OLSEN

Bologna
Tall yet technically refined, the Italy-based right-winger was worth his weight in gold to the Danes during qualifying, netting seven goals. He is no stranger to the Under-21 Euros, having taken part in the 2019 edition, scoring in a 3-1 victory over Austria. He first made a name for himself when on a goal spree for Danish Superliga outfit Nordsjaelland in the 2018-19 season.

Jon Dagur THORSTEINSSON

Aarhus
With the Fulham academy from 2015 to 2019, the Norse left-winger could not quite make the grade in England. But he has bounced back well in the Danish elite with Aarhus, where he has been making a sizeable contribution to their push for European qualification this season. Ever alert, mobile and sharp in the box. Has no problem switching to the right-flank or playing in a central box-to-box brief.

Bastien TOMA

Genk
For a Swiss side which managed to maintain high standards throughout qualification – winning nine of their ten games – central midfielder Toma was constantly one of the leading lights, catching the eye with his dribbling skills, game management and eye for a killer pass. He is Switzerland's assist king and when he performs, the team performs.

Fabio VIEIRA

Porto
There are few, if any, Portugal youngsters with as much natural ball-manipulating talent as Vieira. He can be magically influential on his day and was just so when scoring both goals in a 2-1 qualifying win against the Netherlands in November. He recently joined the camp of top agent Pini Zahavi, which might indicate that a big move overseas is in the offing.

Florian WIRTZ

Bayer Leverkusen
Many in German football circles see the 17-year-old attacking midfielder as the most gifted player of his generation. Last season, after scoring against Bayern Munich, Wirtz became the youngest-ever marksman in the history of the Bundesliga (17 years and 34 days). Shortly before Christmas, he signed a new contract with Leverkusen, which theoretically ties him to the BayArena club until 2023.

6 of the best

MLS talking points

The 2021 Major League Soccer season kicks off on April 17. **James Nalton** takes a look at the key talking points ahead of the new campaign

New appointment... Heinze moved to Atlanta after three years at Velez Sarsfield

1 Can Heinze unite Atlanta United?

Phil Neville's appointment as Inter Miami head coach made headlines on one side of the Atlantic, but in the Americas, the biggest move is that of another former Manchester United player, Gabriel Heinze.

The highly-rated Argentine coach is tasked with restoring Atlanta United's attacking verve, reinstalling the style of the club's early years under former Barcelona coach Gerardo Martino, which saw them lift the MLS Cup in 2018.

A US Open Cup and Campeones Cup followed under Frank de Boer in 2019 after Martino left to manage Mexico, but the style went stale. In 2020, so did the results, and De Boer departed.

Heinze arrives with a glowing reputation from his time in Argentina as coach of Velez Sarsfield. Like Martino, he is heavily influenced by Marcelo Bielsa, and this has Atlanta supporters keenly anticipating the new season.

2 South American signings

MLS is increasingly becoming a destination for talented young South Americans, with more and more clubs getting in on the act.

The biggest transfer during the off-season has been that of 21-year-old Brazilian striker Brenner, who joined FC Cincinnati from Sao Paulo for $13 million (around £9.5m).

In the past, such a player may have gone to Europe with the aim of reaching the Champions League, or another big club in South America.

Atlanta United have previously made waves in this market too, paying seven-figure fees for Marcelino Moreno (Lanus), Erik Lopez (Olimpia) and Santiago Sosa (River Plate), and adding forward Lisandro Lopez from Racing Club.

New arrival... Brenner

3 Homegrown talent

Just as players arrive in greater numbers from South America, MLS' homegrown talents are increasingly attracting interest from Europe.

Last year's Supporters' Shield winners Philadelphia Union sold Mark McKenzie and Brenden Aaronson to Genk and RB Salzburg respectively, while highly-rated FC Dallas right-back Bryan Reynolds joined Roma.

Given the league's roster restrictions, MLS clubs are realising the value of quality homegrown talent, and keeping an eye on the latest group of homegrown stars provides interest for fans as well as European scouts.

The likes of Toronto's Ayo Akinola and Colorado's Cole Bassett will certainly be on their lists.

Academy graduate... Ayo Akinola joined Toronto aged 15

Hands on...Inter Miami owner David Beckham

4 David Beckham

After an indifferent debut season under Uruguayan head coach Diego Alonso, Inter Miami have changed course.

Phil Neville replaced Alonso, arriving alongside new sporting director, Chris Henderson, but the biggest change might be the increased involvement of owner David Beckham, keen to see a return on his investment in the likes of Gonzalo Higuain and Blaise Matuidi.

"My work with Chris and Phil will be very hands-on," Beckham said in January, as he aims to "make sure that this club is treated and seen as one of the top clubs in the game."

Miami made the play-in round of the play-offs last season, but a cohesive plan was lacking. That wasn't solely on Alonso or then-sporting director Paul McDonough, but with Beckham overseeing things, there should be clearer direction.

5 MLS uncertainty

MLS...The 2021 season will be the league's 26th year

Following the success of the 2020 season, there were fewer doubts as to whether MLS could continue during a pandemic in 2021, but uncertainty remained for different reasons.

In December, the league invoked the force majeure clause present in their most recent collective bargaining agreement with the players.

This meant the league and the players' union, the MLSPA, returned to the negotiating table to carve out renewed terms around pay and working conditions.

The pandemic played a part as the league isn't bringing in as much revenue because of it, while players – many of whom are relatively low earners in football terms – couldn't afford a work interruption or loss of earnings.

Lockouts – effectively player strikes – are common in other US sports and many predicted one in MLS this year, but an agreement was reached in February after weeks of negotiations, and the league goes ahead as planned.

6 Favourites reset

Champions... Columbus Crew celebrate winning the 2020 final

No team has retained the Supporters' Shield since LA Galaxy in 2011, and no team has won back-to-back MLS Cups since the Galaxy did so in 2011 and 2012.

It will, therefore, be a challenge for Philadelphia Union and Columbus Crew to defend their respective titles, especially with last season's initial favourites Atlanta United, Los Angeles FC and New York City FC back in the mix with a host of sides looking to join them.

MLS can be among the most unpredictable of leagues, as shown in a 2020 season that produced some great storylines. Fans will be hoping for more of the same this time around.

LUIS GONCALVES

"Over ten years without participating is too long"

With crunch time approaching in the AFCON qualifiers, Mark Gleeson sat down with Mozambique coach Luis Goncalves to discuss his team…

A double defeat at the hands of Cameroon in your last two Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers in November, conceding six goals in the process, must have been a blow to your confidence. Are you still confident your team can get the points you require to qualify for the finals?

Of course, the results weren't good but we also have problems with COVID-19. In the last game [a 2-0 home defeat], nine players and I were positive and we couldn't go to the game. That wasn't good, but I believe that for the last two matches against Rwanda and the Cape Verde Islands, we are determined to win, because we know it's our chance to go to the Nations Cup finals.

I believe these last months have allowed the players time to heal the wounds. I speak to the players often and everyone has the same purpose and objective, the same goal. We know this is our chance. They won't be easy matches but it's our opportunity and we must be focused on our target.

On paper, Mozambique should be able to qualify at the expense of Rwanda and Cape Verde, would you agree?

It's true we have a good chance but Rwanda are much stronger than before, and played in the CHAN tournament [*Championnat d'Afrique des Nations*, or African Nations Championship] in Cameroon in January. 50 per cent of those players in CHAN are also in the proper national team, so I think they will be well prepared. We mustn't forget that they still have a chance to qualify also. We are going to have a very difficult match in Kigali.

Mozambique coach…Goncalves took charge in 2019

Cape Verde is maybe a little different because they have changed coaches, their approach is a little different to before, but they have many valuable players. We will play them here in Maputo and that means we have a very good chance. But we must also respect the opponents, who are also fighting for a place at the finals. The key for us is focus and the team spirit…the team spirit must prevail.

Mozambican football right now is in crisis because the league has been stopped because of COVID restrictions. I have seven or eight players who play in the local league in my squad and we are studying ways to keep them active and match fit. I proposed a camp but it's not possible with our COVID-19 regulations. The players have stopped playing and we don't know when the league will resume. As it stands now, we would only start working with the players about ten days before the game in Rwanda on March 24. We have to work with this reality. It is how it is and I believe we can make it with hard work and team spirit, which for me is the key right now.

FIFA is now allowing clubs to refuse call-ups if players face quarantine on return to their clubs. Are you worried there might be problems securing the services of players based in Europe?

Yes, we are always aware of this potential, and that's why we are always communicating with

Homecoming...the Portuguese coach was born in Maputo

Coach...he worked with former manager Abel Xavier, but left to take charge of China's Under-16s

the players and seeing what is going on in those countries. But I believe we will get the players because we have a good relationship with their clubs and the players want to come and play. For a few of them, they know that this is maybe their last chance to get to play at a major tournament like the Cup of Nations. That makes these two matches so very important for them.

In these days of COVID-19 isolation, is that the majority of your work – on the phone to the players, cajoling the clubs, etc.?
No, no. Sometimes I talk with the coaches and players but normally I'm watching the matches, either live or on television or online. I speak to the coaches to find out how the players are doing. Some players aren't playing for their clubs and I try to find out why. We have a few very important players in Europe but we don't have a lot. So, my concern is primarily the welfare of the players because I want them in top shape for when we need them.

Have you discovered any new players from the Mozambican Diaspora over in Europe?
We are working all the time to discover players with Mozambican ties but sometimes we have problems because it takes a long time to get the players available for the national team. Sometimes we have false alerts, we get tipped off about a player who might have the possibility to obtain Mozambican citizenship only to discover this is not the case [laughs].

But we have many players on our radar – we are always searching. I hope to have one or two new players if their paperwork is completed in time for the two qualifiers.

The last time Mozambique qualified for the Africa Cup of Nations was in 2010. Is there a real pressure on you to qualify for the 2022 finals?
Yes, absolutely, everybody wants us to qualify and everybody is waiting for that to happen. We need to be realistic, but we are confident. But it's true that there is a lot of pressure to qualify. Over ten years without participating is too long.

> "Mozambican football right now is in crisis… the players have stopped playing and we don't know when the league will resume"

Your background is in youth football, so you are well placed to answer this question: Where is the next Eusebio, Mario Coluna, or Matateu in Mozambican football?
These are different times I can say but we have talent. We need to better organise the youth set up, the clubs and academies. We are working on a major plan to develop the youth. We have talent but we don't have much else – infrastructure, fields; we need to improve coaching education and nutrition. But the talent exists. We need to bet more on youth.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

In form...November's defeat to Cameroon ended a six-match unbeaten run

Youth...Goncalves previously worked in the academies of Sporting, Porto Belenenses, Estoril and Tondela

RAPHAEL VARANE

"When I'm retired I can think about winning the World Cup...we are only looking forward"

The France and Real Madrid defender looks ahead to this summer's European Championship

It has been a mixed season for Real Madrid, although you have been one of the regular starters. How do you feel 2020-21 has gone so far?
Consistency is the key to success at the very highest level and we need to find more. There have been games where we have played close to our highest level but we need to do that on a more consistent basis. If we do that then we can have a successful season. I am confident but it is important that we just take things game by game. By focusing on the next game and being as best prepared as you can – that is how you win titles.

The season will end with the European Championship – how excited are you about playing in the Euros with France?
I have already had the taste of success with France and I want more. It is not arrogant to be ambitious and I know we can win it. It will be hard – when you are world champions I think there is motivation on other nations to beat you. We are ready, though – we will be prepared.

Is there a greater sense of anticipation after last year's postponement?
Yes, maybe. There was nothing anybody could do about the postponement and it was the right decision at the time, but the players are ready and I am sure that the supporters are as well.

Are you disappointed that France won't be hosting any matches?
Decisions like that are not made by us; they are out of our hands. To play in France would have been nice but we aren't and we just have to get on and play in the cities that have been chosen for us.

It has been over two years since France's World Cup victory – does it feel a lifetime ago or is it still fresh in your mind?
It doesn't feel a lifetime ago but at the same time I don't want to think so much about it. When I am retired I can think back about winning the World Cup and tell stories. After the World Cup win the aim was to try to dominate international football so we are only looking forward.

What is the spirit like in the squad?
Yes, there is confidence – not arrogance but confidence. Like I say, when you are world champions there is a motivation for other teams to beat you, but we just have to accept that is something that comes along with being world champions. We will just be concentrating on each game in the tournament one at a time – and when we are in the final we can think about winning it. ➤

FFF
FRANCE-BELGIQUE
10 JUILLET 2018

World champion... Varane holds the World Cup trophy

How has the squad evolved since that World Cup tournament? Is it even better now than it was two years ago?
It is a young team so we are always evolving. We still have the same mental strength but the truth is we play a totally different way to the team that won the World Cup. We play higher up the field now but we have kept the key qualities and have the right mindset.

You are France's most experienced defender, with over 70 international caps. Do you feel extra responsibility to lead the other defenders?
The coach has given me extra responsibility, and responsibility is something I am used to. I want to give the whole squad – not just the defenders – my experience, my peace of mind, and to be myself, and for them to know I am somebody that they can come and talk to.

France have incredible depth at centre-back. Does that competition for places motivate you? Do you feel confident of starting at the Euros?
Starting at the European Championship is where I want to be – where I have to be. We do have some very talented defenders, but I am confident that my ability and experience will be enough for me to start.

France have been drawn in probably the toughest group – how do you feel about playing Germany and Portugal?
Germany and Portugal are two nations that you expect to face in the semi-final or the final. We are not going to lose our heads and will be taking the tournament one game at a time – and will be preparing for the Hungary game just as diligently as we will for the games against Germany and Portugal.

What other nations concern you going into the tournament?
Two of them are in our group – but there are many other quality teams. Our focus is being as best prepared as we can be. If we are playing at our highest level we know we can beat anybody so it makes more sense to focus on ourselves.

Mentor...Didier Deschamps and Varane in Russia

France coach Didier Deschamps handed you your international debut – what is your relationship like with him?
He is great to work with. He has so much knowledge – not only did he give me my debut but, as I said, he has also given me more responsibility with the team. I want to continue to repay him for all the faith he has shown in me.

Favourite... Varane is one of Zidane's most used players

Deschamps was captain when France went to Euro 2000 as world champions, then became European champions too. How important is his experience to the group?
To have a coach who is not only a good coach but also has done everything as a player is a big thing. I have that for Real Madrid and for France. They have both won everything as players – they know what it takes.

Paul Pogba's future has been continually debated. Can you explain his role in the French team?
He is a midfield player that can adapt. He can be creative and find special passes, but physically he can dominate a game if that is what it calls for. I always have confidence when he is on the field – he is somebody you want on your team.

> "Germany and Portugal are two nations that you expect to face in the semi-final or the final"

Do you ever speak with your club coach Zinedine Zidane about his playing days and the success that he achieved?
To speak with Zidane is something special. He is so calm and he has so much faith in himself. He had faith in himself as a player and now he has faith in himself as a coach, and you can see that faith has paid off as he has had so much success in both. He has a different way of seeing football, of seeing the game; he is very special.

Growing up I didn't really have an idol as such, because my father told me that if I simply concentrated on my own game then everything else would follow. But Zidane was such a special player for us though, who achieved so much – it would have been special to play with him at his peak.

Let's talk about some of your France team-mates – first, Kylian Mbappe: what is he like to play with? How important is he to France's chances?
He is very important – he can be the best player in the world, we can all see that. He is still so young and there is more he can learn and even higher levels he can achieve. Even games when he is quiet he can always be a threat when you need something special.

Both Pogba and Mbappe have been linked with Real Madrid – have you spoken with them about signing? Would you like them to join you in Spain?
I have had so much success at Real Madrid and I only have positive things to say about my time here. It is a club where I have won four Champions League titles, so of course I only have good things to say about my time here and if people ask me I will tell them that. They are both two of the best players in the world, but where their next moves are is their decision.

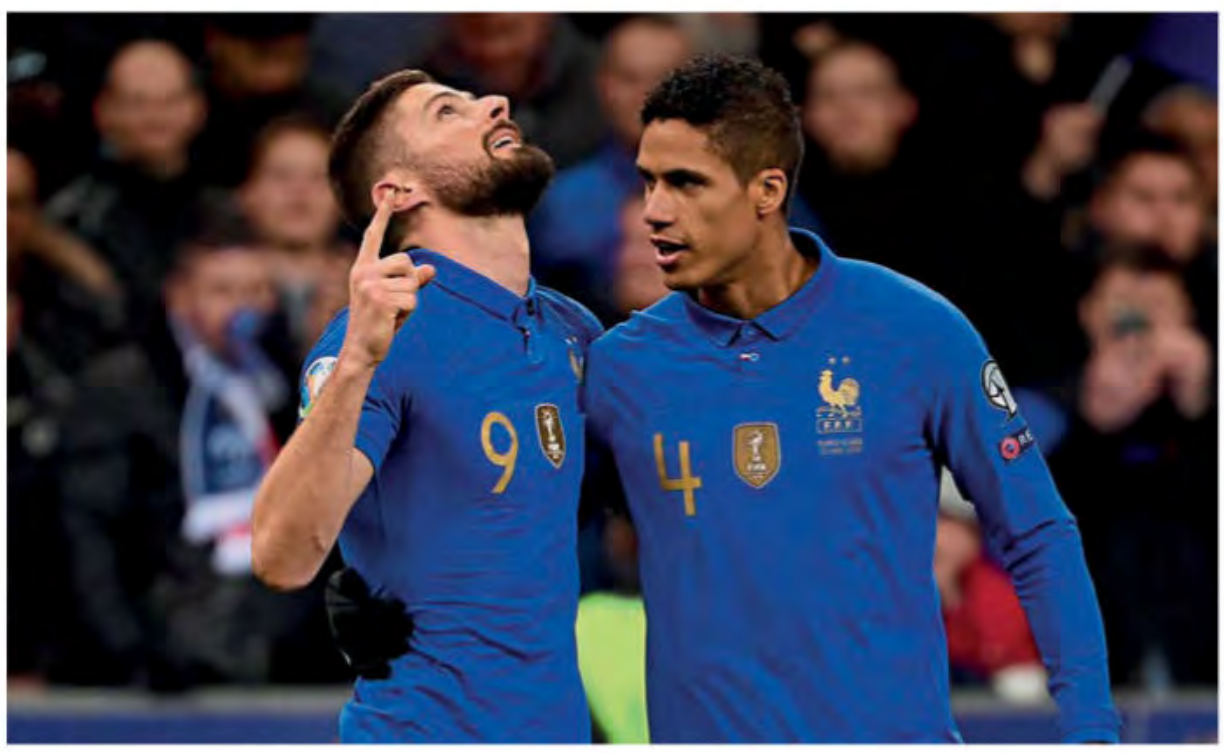
Madrid-bound?...Pogba and Mbappe

Tell us about your captain, Hugo Lloris – what is he like to play with, both as a leader and as a goalkeeper?
He is one of our key players. He is a champion. Some of the saves that he can make are so important for us – they are saves that very few goalkeepers in the world can make. He has a lot of character and we see him as a leader.

As a defender you always want to have trust in your goalkeeper and, of course, you have confidence in a player with the quality of Hugo. He has the confidence and experience to organise the defenders and if he is not happy with you he will let you know.

Olivier Giroud is the country's second-highest goalscorer of all time. Does it surprise you that he is so consistent for the national team? Do you think he can catch Thierry Henry's record?
For me there is no surprise because I see how hard he trains. Even when he was not getting as much playing time he was working so hard on his game and on his fitness in training, he is just hungry. He works for the team so I am not sure he is even thinking about individual records but I am sure there are more international goals there for him.

Interview by Donald Deane


Key men...Varane and Olivier Giroud celebrating during Euro 2020 qualifying

23
23

JOAO FELIX

"I am a better player than I was a year ago"

Portugal's attack is no longer reliant on Cristiano Ronaldo – thanks, in part, to Atletico Madrid's €100 million man

This campaign has been much better for you than last season – what do you put that down to? Do you feel more settled in Madrid now?
In football nothing is given to you – you have to work hard to see the rewards. The first season was a new league for me, but I knew if I kept working hard I would see the rewards and show what I was capable of. The coach and all of my team-mates have been a big help for me as well.

Was it difficult to move to Spain with such a large price tag?
When there is that sort of fee there is always going to be much talk in the media, and I guess with that comes a lot of pressure. I know there is a lot of responsibility playing for a club like Atletico Madrid so I put responsibility on myself to do as well as I can.

Just before joining Atletico, you were part of the Portugal squad that won the 2019 Nations League. How does that experience help you ahead of this summer's Euros?
For me personally it was very important because it gave me more experience playing with the national team and getting to play with my team-mates. Winning the Nations League gave us real confidence. It will not be easy to retain the European Championship, but we are still playing at a very high level. There is every reason to believe that we can be successful again.

Was winning the Nations League the highlight of your career so far?
There was actually another moment that I will never forget. Benfica were playing Frankfurt in the Europa League and I scored a hat-trick. The third goal was very emotional for me. Two days before, I heard some comments in the dressing room that I did not like. It upset me very much, so the hat-trick two days later was like a weight being lifted from my shoulders. I will always remember that third goal and what it meant to me at the time.

How excited are you for the Euros?
For me, just playing for Portugal is a major honour but to represent my country at a major tournament is what I have dreamed of. I have experience of it at youth level but this will be my first with the senior team. I was a teenager when I watched the victory against France and now I want to help make history not just watch it.

Is there a greater sense of anticipation after last year's postponement?
It was disappointing, but there was nothing anybody could do about it. I look at it from a positive point of view and think I am a better player than I was a year ago, so I will be arriving at the tournament with more experience.

Portugal have one of the toughest draws – facing France and Germany – what do you make of your group?
It is a very tough group – there will be three big nations in that group who will have aspirations of winning the competition. There probably are

Following...Ronaldo and Joao Felix will link up at the Euros

groups that are more favourable, and we know we will need to play at a high level to progress out of the group but, for me personally, playing against France and Germany in the European Championship is one of those things I always dreamed of.

How do you feel about playing Hungary in Budapest and Germany in Munich? Will you enjoy the challenge or would you prefer to face those teams at neutral grounds?
I am not even thinking about the venues. Like I said, for me it is a dream come true and I just want to play well and do well for the team. Where that happens and who has home advantage is not important for me.

You faced France in the most recent Nations League campaign. Do you take confidence from those games – especially the 0-0 draw in Paris?
Playing the world champions is always going to be a helpful experience. When you play the best you have to be at your best, and it is always a very valuable experience.

Boy wonder... the 21-year-old is the future of Portuguese football

Hat-trick hero...Joao Felix after scoring against Eintracht Frankfurt in 2019

How is the spirit in the current squad? What would constitute a success?
We are entering the tournament as champions so that is what we want to be. Some players in the squad were there in the final in 2016 and they will not want to give up their crown. We want to retain our title – that will be a success.

Do you have any personal goals for the tournament?
It is always a dream to score big goals or goals that win games, but the main thing for me is to do well and help the team. If I can do that then I will be happy.

Tell us about playing with Cristiano Ronaldo – how big an influence is he on the team?
Ronaldo is an example for everybody – for every single member of the team. Not just for everything he has achieved but for everything he wants to achieve. He has been a big influence on me and a big influence on the team.

What's Ronaldo like in training? Is he a demanding captain?
He would never demand any more than he demands of himself. He has won everything,

In form...nobody scored more goals in the Champions League group stage for Atletico Madrid than Joao Felix

"Ronaldo is an example for everybody… he would never demand any more than he demands of himself"

but still he demands more of himself. He is a great captain and is always ready with advice. Before a game in the Nations League he told me just to stay calm and enjoy myself playing football.

Which former Portugal player would you most like to play with?
It is, of course, amazing that I get to play with Cristiano, and Portugal have had many world-class players I enjoyed watching when I was growing up. If I had to pick one, I think it must be Rui Costa. It would have been incredible to play with him – he was a special talent.

Portugal used to be quite reliant on Ronaldo, but now they have yourself, Bernardo Silva, Bruno Fernandes and Diogo Jota. Are you excited by all of the attacking talent?
We have some very exciting players. Cristiano still has such a big role for us, but hopefully other players, including myself, can help take some of the attacking responsibility and help contribute important goals.

With so many world-class fowards, are Portugal more attacking now than they were in 2016?
I think they are two different teams. We still have players left from 2016, but also have had some excellent young players come through since then. I don't want to compare because the team in 2016 made history but we are also ready.

What can you tell us about the coach, Fernando Santos?
He gave me a big chance so I have only good things to say. He has won the European Championship and the Nations League so, of course, he is a hero and the players have total trust in him.

Finally, what are your personal aims for 2021?
I always want to improve as a player – that is why I work so hard, because that is the way you see improvement. This year though, I would like to win trophies – both with Atletico and Portugal.

Interview by Donald Deane

Tough test...Portugal will face world champions France in the group stage of Euro 2020

STEPHEN BRADLEY

"My house was broken into and I was stabbed in the head… I nearly died"

Ahead of a new League of Ireland Premier Division season, Shamrock Rovers manager Stephen Bradley talks about his playing and managerial career

In his younger days, Stephen Bradley was a wanted man.

Having made his name as a talented schoolboy at Dublin clubs Jobstown Celtic, Maryland Boys and Lourdes Celtic, he made the journey to England to try to find a club, just like so many young Irish players before him.

"I went on trial to around 15 different clubs," Bradley recalls. "Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City – you name them, I was there. I was on trial at Chelsea when I was ten years old."

Eventually, the young midfielder joined Arsenal in 2000, having been approached by an Irish legend. "It was Liam Brady, who was head of the Arsenal academy, that spotted me playing in a Dublin and District Schoolboys training camp.

"Liam was great to work with and overall I really enjoyed my time with Arsenal. But I suppose I got carried away with the big money and didn't do all the training drills the coaches gave me."

Bradley entered the professional game at a time when Premier League wages were growing – even for youngsters like him. His mother, Bernadette, was his agent. "She was brilliant and organised all of my contracts, boot deals and drink sponsorships for me.

"At first I was on a YTS scheme, but then I got a professional contract when I turned 17 and really didn't know how to manage the money I was earning. At that stage, as a young Irish boy in London, I missed somebody who would put their hand on my shoulder and give me sound financial advice. I bought a house and a car in London, but there is no doubt I should have invested my money more wisely."

In spite of Brady's support, and captaining the reserves, Bradley never played a first-team game at Highbury. When the Gunners began recruiting young players from abroad, the writing was on the wall.

"Cesc Fabregas came from Spain in 2003 with a great reputation. I think at that stage I was more or less on my way out," he admits. "I did play Under-16 and Under-21 football for the Republic, but never made the senior squad."

Is the sight of young players crossing the Irish Sea to join the likes of Arsenal a thing of the past? Bradley doesn't think so.

"We are losing 16-year-old Kevin Zefi to Inter in the summer," says the Shamrock Rovers manager. "There is speculation that with Brexit, young Irish players will not be able to join English clubs until they are 18, but I think the English clubs will fight that rule."

In 2004 Bradley left Arsenal following a traumatic experience.

"My house was broken into and I was ➤

SB
umbro

stabbed in the head in the raid and was badly injured. It was so bad I nearly died."

Clearly, it was time to leave London.

"Liam Brady got in touch with David Hay, the manager of Dunfermline, and arranged for me to go on loan."

Bradley spent a season with the Scottish side, playing five times, before returning home to sign for Drogheda in 2005, where he had far greater success.

"I did well with Drogheda," he says. "We won the FAI Cup in 2005 and the League of Ireland Premier Division two years later and also the All-Ireland Setanta Cup."

Soon afterwards, Bradley got his first taste of life at Shamrock Rovers, in a true homecoming for him.

"I went back to Scotland for a brief spell with Falkirk, and then joined Shamrock Rovers in 2009. By then Rovers had moved to Tallaght Stadium, which is only a few hundred yards from where I grew up in Jobstown." Rovers had lost their home in Glenmalure Park in Milltown when the previous owners of the club sold the ground for housing development in 1987, and they had spent 22 years renting various grounds around Dublin.

"I was signed by Michael O'Neill, the current Stoke City manager. We finished second in 2009, won the League in 2010, and then became the first League of Ireland club to play in the group stage of the Europa League."

In spite of that success, the 2010 season was Bradley's last at the club.

"Michael told me I was not in his plans, so I joined St. Patrick's Athletic. I really enjoyed playing under Pete Mahon at St. Pat's and we probably should have won the League in that first season. I was going to retire in 2012, but Pat Scully asked me to join Limerick, who were then in the first division, and I helped them win promotion to the Premier Division."

"In the League of Ireland, sometimes you have to sell to survive"

Key signing...midfielder Ronan Finn (R) competes with Theo Hernandez of Milan

2013 was Bradley's final season as a player before retiring, his 30th birthday still a few years away. He quickly turned his attention to his next move, and his first port of call was former club Arsenal.

"A year before I retired, I sat down with my advisor Graham Barrett, who also played for Arsenal, and we had a serious chat. Graham knew that I had a great interest in coaching. I retired from playing at the age of 26, but I was always interested in the coaching side and had taken my first coaching course at the age of 21. I would take down notes from what managers said and even watching games on television I would make my own notes.

"I was Arsenal's Irish scout for five years. I wasn't sending over many young boys from Ireland, but was watching possible first-team players for [chief scout] Steve Rowley on video or in internationals."

Bradley's work with Arsenal came to an end in 2016, when he took the Rovers job. Five years on, he has won the League and FAI Cup, and helped restore the team to its status as one of the strongest in the country.

"In my first few years as Rovers manager, Dundalk and Cork City were the leading clubs. Signing Ronan Finn from Dundalk was a key move for me as prior to that it looked like we had trouble attracting top players to the club.

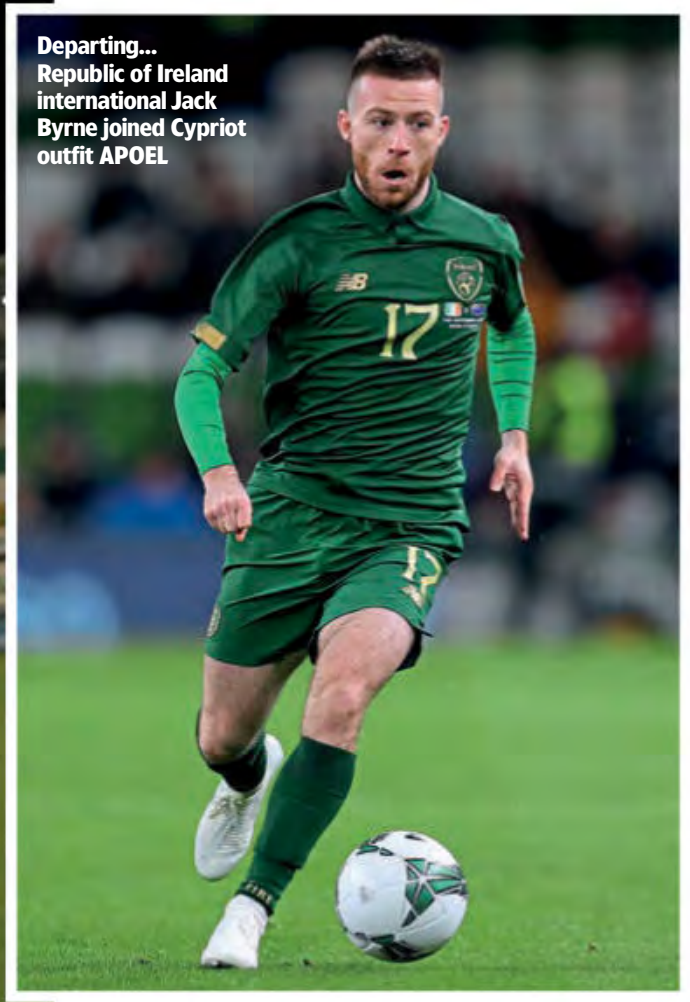
"We finished third behind Cork and Dundalk in 2017 and 2018, we were second to Dundalk in 2019 and then went unbeaten when winning the championship last season." It was the club's 18th league title, and the first time in 93 years that a team went through the entire season unbeaten; the last club to do so was also Rovers in 1924-25 and again 1926-27. "Our only defeat last year was in the FAI Cup final where we were beaten 4-2 by Dundalk. But we did have the satisfaction of winning the FAI Cup in 2019 when beating Dundalk on penalties." That trophy was a record 25th for the club, but their first since 1987.

Rovers' success has not gone unnoticed. Two of Bradley's star signings departed in January – Player of the Year Jack Byrne to APOEL, and Aaron McEneff to Hearts.

"I had a feeling all along that we were going to lose Jack, who is now an Irish international. We couldn't compete with the offer he got from APOEL, who were managed by Mick McCarthy when Jack moved to Cyprus. There was a lot of interest in Aaron from Championship clubs and from Scotland, and in the League of Ireland sometimes you have to sell to survive.

The club have been able to reinvest though,

Winners... Bradley (L) and Ronan Finn (R) hold the Premier Division trophy



Departing... Republic of Ireland international Jack Byrne joined Cypriot outfit APOEL

and Bradley has more transfer plans for the future too.

"I'm happy with the players we have brought in as replacements. Sean Gannon and Sean Hoare have joined us from Dundalk and Chris McCann, who came from Oldham Athletic, is an experienced player, who played for Burnley in the Premier League.

"Another player I am interested in is Richie Towell, currently with Salford City, but who previously played for Dundalk. I have always liked him as a player and if Richie becomes available in the summer we would certainly be interested in signing him."

Nevertheless, retaining the title will be difficult for Rovers, with plenty of clubs looking to topple them.

"There is a fierce rivalry between ourselves and our north Dublin rivals Bohemians. That rivalry should intensify this season as we have signed Daniel Mandroiu from Bohs. Danny is the third player that I have signed from Bohemians in my time as Rovers manager [after Dylan Watts and Roberto Lopes].

"I think our main rivals again this season will probably be Bohs and Dundalk. Both clubs have made some good signings and this will be Filippo Giovagnoli's [Dundalk's Italian-born manager] first full season in charge."

Winning last season's title means that Rovers will enter the Champions League qualifying rounds in the summer, but Europa League qualification is the real target.

"Dundalk got a great draw last year against a club from the Faroes. I don't think I have seen such a kind draw for a League of Ireland club in a one-off game – I'd love to get a draw like that." In contrast, Shamrock Rovers were drawn against Milan, losing 2-0 at home.

In many ways, the future is bright for Rovers. But they still need more supporters tuning in to watch them.

"It's difficult, but it can be done," says Bradley. "Last season supporters were not allowed to attend games due to COVID, and the FAI came up with a programme called 'WatchLOI', where fans could view a game on TV for just €5.

"Right now it looks like there won't be any supporters allowed into grounds for the first half of the season, and I think we need to expand WatchLOI into a proper programme – interview coaches and former players before the game and at half-time, and make it even more attractive.

"Looking further ahead to when the supporters are allowed back, we need to engage with schools and communities and we need to improve the facilities in the stadiums if we want more young and indeed older people to see our games live."

Whether or not the fans tune in to watch Bradley's team, clubs in England and Scotland are sure to be keeping an eye on the promising young manager, who doesn't turn 37 until November. November 19, to be precise; a significant date for more than one reason: "I hadn't looked that far ahead, but yes – that's the night we play Drogheda United at home in our final League game of the season. It would be nice to clinch title number 19 on the 19th, my birthday."

Interview by Sean Creedon

European heavyweights...Rovers hosted Milan in Europa League qualifying in September, losing 2-0

Internazionale-bound...Kevin Zefi, the League of Ireland's youngest-ever goalscorer

CONNED

In 2013, *World Soccer* sent Steve Menary on an investigation into the rise of fake agents. Eight years on, the problems have not been addressed

Top-level football has played on during the coronavirus pandemic but below that many players, particularly those at the start of their careers, have been kicking their heels at home with their dreams on hold.

Often only connected to the outside world via social media, swathes of young players have fallen victim to predatory online criminals posing as agents during the pandemic as cybercrime boomed.

Players from as far away as Zimbabwe were recently approached online and offered a trial at North Macedonian club Gjorce Petrov, but first they would need to pay $300 for a visa. The offer came from an agent called David Degen and was signed by club official Aleksandar Tanevski, but neither person was really involved.

"In the last four or five years someone has falsely used my name," says Degen, a former Swiss international, who played for Young Boys Berne and Basle. "I have received calls from players who were cheated by that person. I have informed the police about this."

Another recent scam involved an agent called Francis Mofor, who claims to be able to arrange trials at clubs including Manchester United, Cardiff City, Middlesbrough and Barton Rovers. But only after paying fees ranging from £580 to £680.

Another scam involved an offer of a trial with Ukrainian club Zorya Luhansk supposedly through super-agent Mino Raiola but only after paying a $500 fee. Like the other "offers" this was a con. The real Raiola was again not involved but the *modus operandi* was the same.

The fake agents lure in ambitious young players, often from less developed countries, on social media with the offer of a trial at a professional club. Once the players are hooked, the "agents" then ask for a payment to ensure the trial happens.

Usually the "fee" is around $500 with payment to be made via a method where tracking the payee is difficult once the cash has been collected. A transfer via Western Union is common. More recently, Skrill is another option.

World Soccer first covered the heart-rending misery caused by fake agents nearly a decade ago in a two-part series. Since then, depressingly, little has changed and the pandemic has only exacerbated the problem.

Fred Lord, director of anti-corruption and transparency operations at the International Centre for Sports Security (ICSS), says: "Trafficking, terrorism and fake agents are the hot zone now and 419 scammers are going for the quick hit as they can't move anyone around due to coronavirus."

The "419 scam" is an advance fee fraud and named after the section of the criminal code in Nigeria, where many scammers are based.

A decade ago, the 419 scammers were using a directory of agents licensed by FIFA and published on the world body's website. Not all the licensed agents on this directory had provided a phone number or email, so stealing their identity was easy for the scammers, who typically reversed the Christian and surnames of real agents.

In one hilarious attempt, scammers unwittingly switched round the names

12

of Dorset-based agent Peter Conning, who became... Conning Peter. There are still four profiles of Conning Peter on LinkedIn alone; two featuring a photo of the real Peter Conning during his playing days.

"I did make some efforts to close things down but it just became a drag," says the real Peter Conning. "The work I'm involved with has not been hindered by it so I've just accepted it's out there."

FIFA took down the directory after ceasing to licence agents in 2015 but copies could still be found elsewhere on the web for years afterwards. With players' agents no longer licensed by FIFA, anyone claiming to be a FIFA-licensed agent should immediately attract suspicion, but now virtually anyone can be an intermediary: as players' agents are now described: and scammers have also embraced the rise of smart phones and apps, such as Playerhunter.

The deregulation has created a free-for-all according to some agents. A few years ago, Bryan Lim, sporting director at Singapore-based intermediaries Trebol Sports International, was constantly battling the tide of fake agents but now the line is blurring. "I am unsure if the situation has improved," says Lim. "However, amateur agents have been on the rise; those who are there to make a quick pile."

"Agents" like Martin Kois: also sometimes known as Martin Kovalsky, Martin Kocis and more recently Martin Blatny: who has been accused of offering trials in Italy and Portugal via Instagram to young players in return for a fee of around €1,000.

Originally from Slovakia, Kois has left a trail of broken dreams and debts across eight countries including Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the USA.

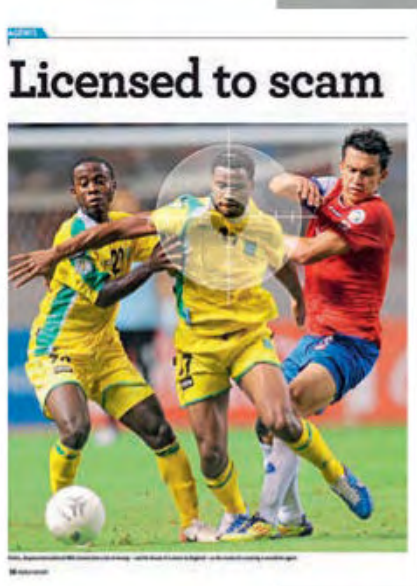
After receiving scores of complaints about Kois or his alter egos, international players union FIFPro has published warnings to young players about his methods.

Raymond Beaard, FIFPro's head of communications, says: "People will pay €100, then he would ask for another €200 or €300 more in extra costs. By adding costs slowly there becomes a point of no return for the player, as they do not want to lose what they have already spent."

After his activities were publicised, Kois repaid money to some "clients" in countries to avoid prosecution but his exploits are no surprise to Lukas Bielak, a 34-year-old Slovak centre back who plays for Polish club GKS Jastrzebie on loan from Stal Mielec.

"I have a different experience with Martin Kois," explains Bielak. "We went to university together in the years 2006-2009. That's when he asked me if I would like to make money, as he said he was selling branded Umbro clothing and accessories for football clubs in the Czech Republic. I trusted him and gave him €6,200, of which he had to pay me a commission of €2,000.

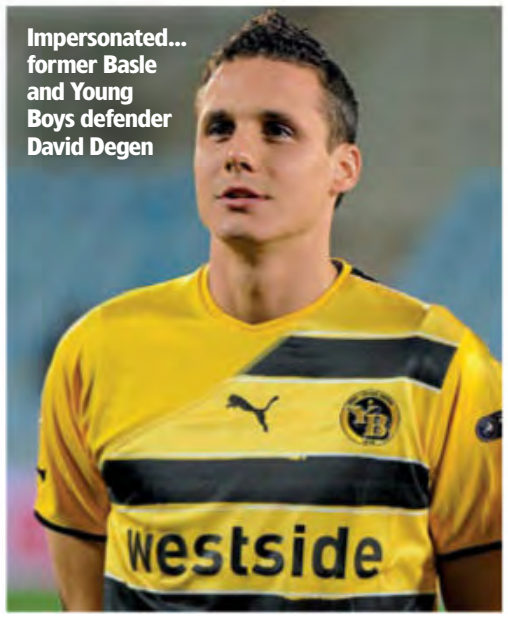
"We wrote a position agreement. He never returned my money and the dispute ended in court. He hasn't returned a single euro in ten years. As I learned later, he deceived many more people in this way. He later began to


Licensed to scam

Licensed to scam... *World Soccer* first reported on this issue in 2013

Targeted... "the problem is particularly acute in Africa"

Super-agent... Mino Raiola has been a victim of impersonation



Impersonated... former Basle and Young Boys defender David Degen

Fake...examples of letters sent to players by fake football agents

pretend to be a fake football agent."

There have been court judgements in 2015 and 2016 against Kois and the Slovak Football Association issued a warning about his activities in 2019 but he remains on the loose.

"Many people trusted him because he went to the parents," says SFA football integrity manager Jakub Cavoj: "I sent information to FIFA and UEFA. UEFA say it's a FIFA matter and FIFA say the Slovak FA have to do something but he has gone to the Czech Republic so there is no chance to do anything. I want to give the cases to the Slovak police but they only want to deal with cases of Slovak citizens."

International players union FIFPro has stepped into this vacuum and regularly provides alerts on its website about fake agents and scams, including Kois, the fake Gjorce Petrov trials and dubious offers from Francis Mofor.

Many of their victims lose money, but the ICSS has uncovered players who were lured to Paris from Cameroon, Ghana and Mali for non-existent trials by fake agents.

> "By adding costs slowly there becomes a point of no return for the player, as they do not want to lose what they have already spent"
>
> **Raymond Beaard, FIFPro's head of communications**

Urged to act... FIFA president Gianni Infantino

The problem is particularly acute in Africa and FIFPro is planning a major campaign to alert young players on the continent to the dangers posed by fake agents. "There are a lot of African players who will pay all of their savings for a chance to play football anywhere in the world," adds Beaard.

Although FIFA's decision to stop the old licensing system in 2015 partly accelerated the subsequent chaos, the old system was widely accepted to have been out of date and change was needed.

FIFA is now consulting on a new system. Proposals include a licensing system, character tests and commission caps, publishing fees received by clubs and agents.

The new regulations would also prohibit conflicts of interest, such as club or national association officials owning stakes in player agencies.

A spokesperson for FIFA says: "The need for a stricter regulatory framework came as a response to a series of worrying trends that have affected the transfer market in recent years. In particular, FIFA has observed a growing number of abusive and excessive practices, widespread conflicts of interests, and a market driven by speculation rather than solidarity and redistribution across the football pyramid.

"This [issue] will be addressed in our reform, for example, by having an online agent directory with all the licensed agents listed with picture and full name, nationality, licence number, company name, address, office telephone, mobile, office email, company website and services provided so that players can check if certain individual is a licensed agent."

FIFA also plans to produce a handbook in conjunction with agents, clubs and players showing rights, responsibilities and bad practices of agents along with an educational questionnaire instructing players how the process should work. This should help, but the issue goes beyond football.

"The problem is, they are not real agents," adds FIFPro's Raymond Beaard. "They are online criminals, so it doesn't matter if they need a registration or not as there are a lot of people out there who are desperate enough not to check."

So while FIFA is trying to address the problem, a wider effort is needed to try to counter the plague of fake agents and that includes young players asking and thinking before replying to any uninvited solicitation.

ALL IN THE HEAD

James Kelly delves deep into i-BrainTech: the future of football

In 2011 Castrol released *Ronaldo: Tested to the Limit*. In this documentary, Cristiano Ronaldo was put through a series of vigorous tests by his engine oil sponsor to highlight his footballing prowess.

Of the various challenges, one in particular made headlines – namely the Portuguese scoring from several crosses in complete darkness. A remarkable feat, but there is a simple answer.

"He can do that because his areas of the brain are so strong in processing information," explains Konstantin Sonkin, the founder and CEO of i-BrainTech. "In a split-second just the sound of the kick creates a trajectory of the ball for him. He can estimate where the ball will be because his brain is so developed."

Being a neuroscientist in Israel, Sonkin is not the first person you would associate with a five-time Ballon d'Or winner. And yet, he might be the man behind football's next big step.

During the last few decades, football has been advanced by implementation of analytics and a more detailed fitness schedule. In 1996 Arsene Wenger's banning of chocolate and boozing upon his arrival at Arsenal gave way to broader embracing of nutritionists.

Into the 21st century and Igor Biscan's physical regime was ridiculed by fellow Liverpool team-mates. They suggested he should instead focus on his passing ability, rather than hiring a personal trainer to do gym sessions.

Fast forward to the present day though, and workouts, data and diet have become normalised parts of football. In 2021 it would be far more unusual to see a player not following these patterns. If Sonkin is right, brain training will soon become the latest trend.

A PhD in computer science, Sonkin joined a centre for innovations in neuroscience at Tel Aviv University in 2017, aiming to examine how artificial intelligence could improve understanding of human intelligence.

His success decoding brain signals in sufferers of cerebral palsy and stroke victims led to him co-founding i-BrainTechnology, with the intention of working alongside athletes.

Neurology in football has existed for a decade or so, but with some scepticism over its impact. Cognitive systems often consist of simple 2D exercises such as catching a ball with a computer mouse.

Meanwhile other more advanced reaction training schemes – such as Nike's SPARQ technology – require physical activity. These however, are also expensive, like the multi-million-pound Footbonaut credited with helping Mario Gotze score Germany's 2014 World Cup winning goal.

i-BrainTech's software differs by having users stay stationery. They sit down, place a brain cap on their head and play a computer game. Users

Perfectly timed... Cristiano Ronaldo judges the trajectory of this cross to perfection before scoring against Sampdoria in 2019

envisage themselves performing whatever action is required, which in turn controls an on-screen avatar.

It sounds simple, but former USA international Jonathan Bornstein, who has used the system, maintains that it is not. "When you blink you see the front lobe move. You can feel your brain working – it's crazy!

"You actually feel the pulsing inside your head, it's not easy. If you stop focusing on what you're having to do, you can actually make your avatar fall asleep. I get done with it and I'm kind of amped, like 'yeah I'm focused, I can go out and do something.'"

Starting with dead-ball scenarios, i-BrainTech have since developed drills for every position on the pitch. Goalkeepers and defenders need to play long passes into the channels, whilst there are a variety of passing drills for midfielders and wingers can work on crossing.

Sonkin explains how the need for performing these exercises in conventional training is not to train the muscles, but rather the automated functions of the brain through repetition.

One example he gives is the concept of a "weak foot". Improvement here has nothing to do with overcoming any physical deficiency, but rather a weaker cognitive function of the brain to control muscles in that particular leg.

"What we're doing is we're allowing footballers to dramatically improve their performance by directly training their most important organ", Sonkin says. "Research suggests 90 per cent of success in modern sports is determined by brain functionality.

"Football is a technically difficult game that requires a lot of brain engagement and the development of many functions. You need to be at the top level cognitively and process a lot of information in a split second.

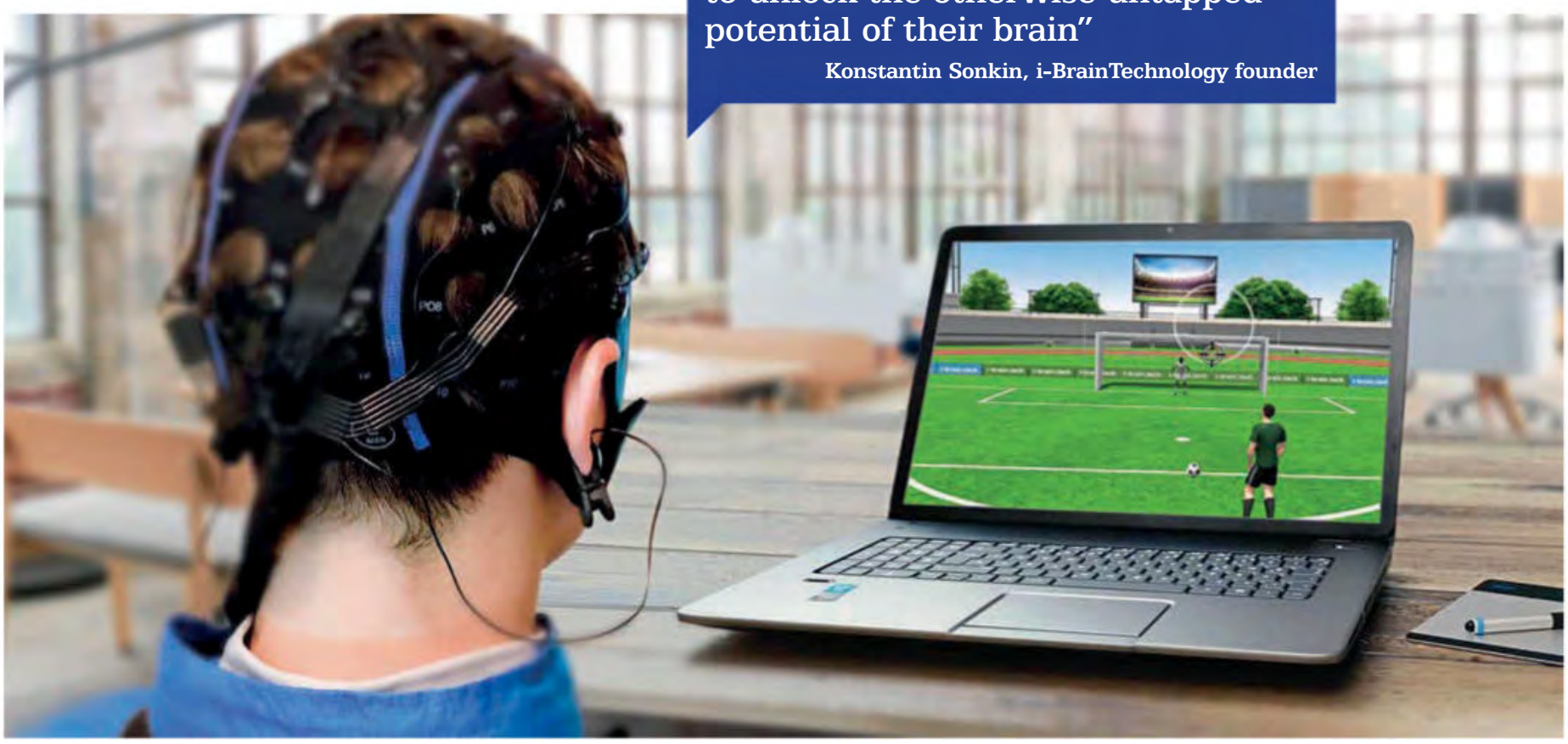
"Let's say what is the difference between me and Lionel Messi? We are the same age, same height, almost the same physical condition, and I could argue that he's generally not smarter than me. But he is a football star, and I'm a neuroscientist.

"The reason is that his brain is moving more efficiently, more accurately, and faster than all the competition. He can process a lot of information from all inputs of his body – visual, auditory, etc. – and that makes him much more efficient.

"So, he's a star not because he's the best athlete, but because his brain is a unique feat for a footballer. Why one good athlete very often wins against another very good

World Cup winner... Mario Gotze credits other brain-training software with helping him score in the 2014 final

> "Our mission is to allow footballers to unlock the otherwise untapped potential of their brain"
>
> Konstantin Sonkin, i-BrainTechnology founder



Demonstration... the software in use

Close-up... i-BrainTech's brain cap

i-BrainTech founder... Konstantin Sonkin

athlete is because of more efficient brain functionality."

Whilst i-BrainTech do not claim they will turn everyone into the Argentine, results from pilot research at Zenit St. Petersburg's academy team are encouraging.

Of the focus group, half did not use the product, whilst the others did twice a week for 25 minutes before training. In just six weeks, the group that used i-BrainTech demonstrated significant increases in both the accuracy (35 per cent) and speed (33 per cent) of their free-kicks.

Alongside technical enhancement, Sonkin says the system can also provide analysis that clubs can use to judge the mental state of their squad. Data can be used to see which areas of players' brains are less developed, which may explain inability to cope under pressure or when fatigued.

"You can derive real insights about the readiness of a player for an important match. We envisage that soon, coaches thinking about who is going to be in the line-up will take into account insights about players' mental readiness and brain performance. It might be so relevant for efficient games and results."

"In general terms concentration is something a lot of young players need to work on", says Bornstein. "One of the biggest things I'm always yelling at them to do is stay tuned in. In doing this for 25 minutes you have to focus in order to have success."

i-BrainTech say their system can be incorporated into a players' training routine, with less than an hour of work necessary each week to see significant improvements.

Sonkin and his team are particularly hopeful for the potential impact their research will have on youth players, owing to their increased brain plasticity. Put simply, this term refers to the ability of the brain to develop and memorise certain functions, which is stronger in younger age groups.

The company are about to undertake a big pilot with the Wingate Institution, the largest sports science centre in Israel. Here further research will be conducted with several Israeli national youth teams to provide broader data.

After that the plan is to export the product more globally. Sonkin says several MLS teams are eager to invest in the technology, including Bornstein's Chicago Fire. i-BrainTech have also recently held discussions with European giants such as Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain.

A further benefit of i-BrainTech's system is that since players are not required to move whilst playing the game, it can be used during injury rehabilitation. The company hopes this technology will reduce the time for a player to regain peak performance.

"Let's say I cut my ligaments and I cannot train for six months", says Maccabi Tel-Aviv captain Sheran Yeini. "If I can work on my passes by playing the game, I can come in a much better shape than a player that didn't do anything."

As part of the design team, Yeini has big ambitions for the future of the product. "I hope that you will be able to analyse your performance once the match has been played. They can put me back in the specific place I was in a virtual reality game.

"I will be at the same body angle and will see exactly what I saw. Then they will tell me 'change your angle, look to the other side', and then I will see the players that I didn't see on the pitch."

Bornstein says through using i-BrainTech's system he can see how his focus and concentration on the pitch are improving, even at the age of 36. "Data is now driving so much of the world, especially within sports. I do think this is the next stage in the development of a different type of training."

Sonkin certainly hopes so. "Our main mission is to bring brain training and analytics to football; we believe it is very important for performance and athletic development. We allow footballers to unlock the otherwise untapped potential of their brain."

i-BrainTech advocate... Chicago Fire defender Jonathan Bornstein says he's improved thanks to the tech

Glenn Moore

The haves and have nots

This year's SheBelieves Cup tournament has exposed the inequalities in the women's international game

SheBelieves Cup... Brazil midfielder Adriana celebrates scoring her side's third goal against Argentina

On reflection, Argentina's 6-0 defeat to United States in the SheBelieves Cup could have been a lot worse, as a 27-1 shot count underlined. It was certainly neither a disgrace nor a surprise. In the home corner the world champions, undefeated in 36 matches with 32 wins in their previous 33 outings. In the away corner a team that went into the tournament having not played for 15 months.

That absence from the international arena would have been even longer had Japan not pulled out of the SBC due to COVID. US Soccer Federation scrambled for a replacement and wound up with Argentina, at 31st in the world comfortably the lowest-ranked team to feature in the tournament's six-year history.

As it was *La Albiceleste* showed the spirit they displayed at the 2019 World Cup, when they held Japan and Scotland, the latter after having gone 3-0 down with 20 minutes left, and only lost 1-0 to England. They were barely off the plane when losing 4-1 to Brazil in the opening match, and then followed that by losing 1-0 to Canada before succumbing to the US. Given their hosts had cumulatively won the previous three meetings 22-1, a 6-0 defeat was slightly better than par.

Adding to Argentina's problems, several players had to pull out after testing positive for COVID, including captain and goalkeeper Vanina Correa. Three more of their best players, La Liga-based trio Estefania Banini, Ruth Bravo and Florencia Bonsegundo, were absent. But this wound was self-inflicted. Banini and Bravo were among the players to publicly call for better support from the Argentine federation after the World Cup – and subsequently dropped from the Pan American Games. Bonsegundo pulled out of that tournament, reportedly in solidarity. She was named on the long list for the SBC but was not in the final squad.

Player activism was a reaction to years of neglect. The team did not play for 18 months from 2015 to 2017 and on the rare occasions they met up were not paid the $10-a-day training compensation. There has been some progress since at a domestic level with a semi-professional league launched, won this season by Boca Juniors, but the international team appear an afterthought.

Much the same applies to the previous month's South American visitors to the US. Colombia had not played since 2019 either, and as it was not an international window European clubs were not obliged to release players such as Lady Andrade (Deportivo La Coruna), captain Natalia Gaitan (Sevilla) and Yoreli Rincon (Inter). A youthful all-domestic squad, further weakened by COVID-enforced withdrawals, lost 4-0 and 6-0.

Despite Colombia bidding (unsuccessfully) to host the 2023 Women's World Cup the sport is chronically under-funded. A domestic league, begun in 2017, has veered between levels of professionalism and this year will last less than two months prompting a letter from national team players expressing "extreme concern". Men's legend Carlos Valderrama described it as "more like pre-season training than a league".

Speaking out... Colombia captain Natalia Gaitan has been outspoken on the problems

Players also claim bonuses due them for reaching the knockout stages of the 2015 World Cup were not paid, they were given men's shirts to play in and rarely even had a national training camp, never mind matches. Most seriously of all, former Under-17s coach Didier Luna was found guilty of sexually harassing the team's physio and sentenced to 28 days in jail (a fine was paid instead). This incident had echoes of even more concerning ones in Haiti and Afghanistan, which have led to both national FA presidents, Yves Jean-Bart and Karemuddin Karim respectively, being banned for life by FIFA.

The governing body, belatedly, is driving progress. As part of FIFA's COVID relief programme, grants of $500,000 are available for allocation to women's football. Mexico, for one, are using this to cover testing and COVID protocols required to maintain the Liga MX Femenil.

There is also the threat of losing FIFA largesse. South Sudan launched its first women's league in February, a response to FIFA/CAF funding being reduced by $200,000-a-year due to the lack of activity in the women's game.

A disparity in football investment between countries is not unique – it happens in the men's game too – but

> A disparity in football investment between countries is not unique – it happens in the men's game too – but it is greater and more widespread in the women's game

it is greater and more widespread in the women's game. Nor is it limited to regions, which have traditionally been indifferent.

Japan won the 2011 World Cup, but has failed to develop a strong domestic base. That should change this year with the autumn launch of a fully professional competition. Named the Women's Empowerment League, participating clubs will be required to employ a significant level of women off the field.

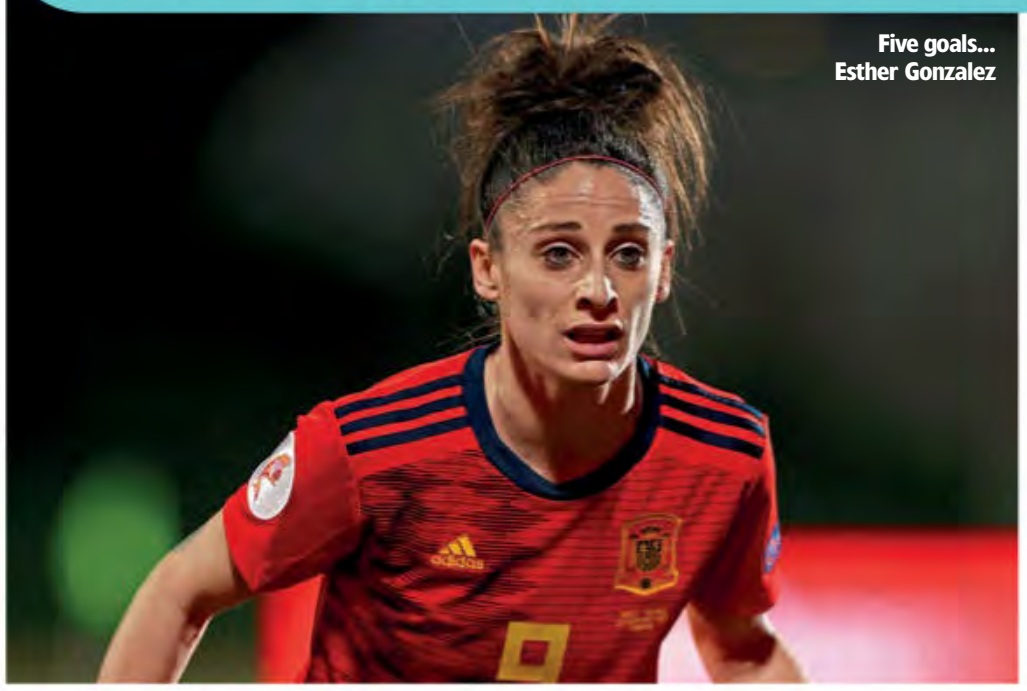
Sweden was one of women's football's early adopters and the national team remain a force. Yet the champions, Kopparbergs/Gothenburg, announced recently that they would disband within days of being knocked out of the Champions League by Manchester City. The Kopparbergs brewery had decided it could not compete at European level, believing it would be increasingly dominated by clubs like City, and would pull the plug. However, efforts were made to find a new owner and BK Hacken, which has a men's first division and women's third-tier club, agreed to take over. The incident did, however, highlight the sport's continuing fragility.

Even in the US progress is not always smooth. The players equality suit against the US Soccer Federation is into a third year. While the players' demand for $66m in damages has been dismissed, still at issue is a settlement on working conditions. That may now be determined at an April hearing, enabling the players to start a planned appeal against the equal pay ruling.

On the field US players continue to make their case. Victory over Argentina wrapped up another SBC success having already defeated Canada 1-0 and Brazil 2-0. With American wins and Argentine losses predictable, most interest surrounded Brazil's match with a Canadian team under new coach Bev Priestman. US-based Debinha, who had a fine tournament, scored as Brazil won 2-0. All games were played in Orlando with the outlay required to make it COVID-secure underlining the investment underpinning US success. It is a commitment many of their opponents can only dream of.

Champions...USA won their fourth SheBelieves Cup

Round-up



Five goals... Esther Gonzalez

QUARTET BOOK EUROS SPOTS

Spain, Finland, Austria and Italy sealed qualifying places for Euro 2022, leaving three spots to be determined in the April play-offs. Spain put 13 goals past Azerbaijan in Baku, Levante's Esther Gonzalez scoring five and Barcelona's Jennifer Hermoso four, to win Group D.

Having won 1-0 in Scotland with a 95th-minute winner in their previous match, the Finns repeated the trick versus Portugal, Linda Sallstrom scoring the only goal in the 93rd minute to win Group E. The Paris FC striker had scored a 90th-minute equaliser in the reverse fixture in Portugal.

Austria and Italy, the latter by dint of a 12-0 victory over Israel, joined Iceland as the three best runners-up. Italy's win sent Switzerland into the play-offs along with Russia, Czech Republic, Portugal, Ukraine and Northern Ireland.

OLYMPIC QUALIFYING DELAY

COVID further delayed qualifying for the Tokyo Olympics with the final play-offs, re-scheduled for February, pushed back to April. South Korea meet China for the remaining Asian berth while Cameroon face Chile for the CAF/CONMEBOL slot. Hosts Japan, holders USA, Brazil, Netherlands, Sweden, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Zambia have already qualified.

RARE CHELSEA LOSS

WSL champions Chelsea lost their first league game for more than two years, a 33-match run, when they fell to a shock 2-1 defeat at home to Brighton. However, they did qualify for the final of the league cup in which they will face Bristol City.

The FA Cup has been delayed due to COVID and, as with the 2020 competition, is unlikely to be completed until the autumn. However, £2.25m government funding should ensure the top two tiers of the women's game complete the campaign, unlike last season when positions were decided on a points-per-game basis.

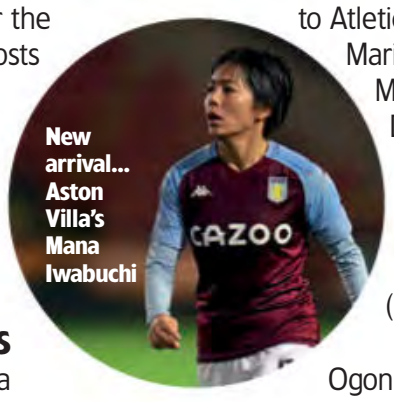
Upset...Brighton celebrate during their victory over Chelsea

JAPAN TRIO GO WEST

A trio of Japan internationals headed to Europe in the January transfer window, with Kobe Leonessa's Mana Iwabuchi and Mina Tanaka joining Aston Villa and Bayer Leverkusen respectively, the latter on loan, and Yui Hasegawa (Tokyo Verdy) signing for Milan.

Other notable movers included Cameroon's Ajara Nchout (Valarenga to Atletico Madrid), Norway's Maria Thorisdottir (Chelsea to Manchester United), Spain's Damaris Egurrola (Everton to Lyon), Australia's Jacynta Galabadaarachchi (Napoli to Celtic) and New Zealand's Hannah Wilkinson (Djurgarden to Duisburg).

Madrid CFF signed Nigeria's Ogonna Chukwudi and Osinachi Ohale from CSKA Moscow and Roma respectively, while England veteran Jill Scott, seeking games ahead of the Olympics, went on loan to Everton from Manchester City. There was an instant reward as she won her 150th cap when England beat Northern Ireland 6-0.



New arrival... Aston Villa's Mana Iwabuchi

7,000 FOOTY GAMES ON DVD

WORLD CUPS I EURO CHAMPS I CHAMP LEAGUE I UEFA I CWC I COPA, PREM LEAGUE I LA LIGA I BARCELONA I REAL MADRID I J PELE I CRUYFF I MESSSI I MARADONA

CHEAP CHEAP PRICES

FOR FULL CATALOGUE EMAIL

sammi271@btinternet.com

WorldSoccer Presents

GREATEST RIVALRIES

SPECIAL 100-PAGE SOUVENIR BOOKAZINE ON FOOTBALL'S GREATEST DERBY CLASHES THROUGH THE EYES OF *WORLD SOCCER*

ON SALE NOW

shop.kelsey.co.uk/issue/WSP

ADVERTISING DOESN'T COST, IT PAYS!

CALL 01732 445326

EMAIL INFO@TALKMEDIASALES.CO.UK

FREE

FOOTBALL PROGRAMMES

To receive a FREE programme plus a copy of our latest catalogue (listing several thousand different mint condition Big Match, League, Scottish, Irish, Foreign and Non-League teams programmes etc.) please send your name and address to:

STEVE EARL FOOTBALL PROGRAMMES (DEPT.WS)
BROAD STREET, BUNGAY, SUFFOLK, NR35 1AH, ENGLAND

or phone 01986 892621 or visit www.footballprogs.co.uk

A pack of 15 F.A. CUP FINALS (1970's - 2010's) for only £55 (inc.p&p)

(Credit/Debit Cards & PayPal accepted)

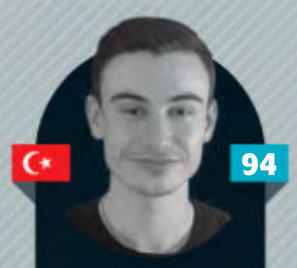
World Service

INCORPORATING Global diary

Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

88 LASANA LIBURD — Caribbean

84 NICK BIDWELL — Europe



94 JAMES KELLY — Turkey

87 STEVE MENARY — Basque Country

90 MARK GLEESON — Africa

92 JOHN DUERDEN — Singapore

92 PLUS

Lion City Sailors... Singapore's first super club

PREVIEW

84 2022 World Cup European qualifiers

DIARY

86 The month in numbers
88 Global diary

NEWS

87 Basque Country
88 Caribbean
90 African Nations Championship
92 Singapore
94 Turkey

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES

96 Club football
97 Internationals

87

Basque Country...freedom fighters

UEFA World Cup Qualifiers

NICK BIDWELL

Preview

Record-chasing... France are bidding to become the first side since Brazil in 1958 and 1962 to win back-to-back World Cups

Here we go again

As Europe's World Cup qualifiers begin on March 24, Nick Bidwell assesses the likely contenders for Qatar

The jostled international calendar means that Europe's World Cup qualifying begins before the European Championship finals have taken place. As a result, when the next round of qualifiers occur in September, Europe's international landscape could look quite different. Somebody will be continental champions and grappling with the pressures that come with that tag, others will be under new management after failing to meet expectations in the summer, while some will have shortened their odds of reaching Qatar with unexpected heroics.

That's why the three upcoming fixtures are so crucial: no team or coach can be sure what state they'll be in on the other side of the Euros, and while the delayed finals are undoubtedly the headline event of 2021, nobody can afford to be distracted. Making a good start has never been more important.

THE FAVOURITES

Almost six decades have passed since Brazil claimed back-to-back World Cup titles in 1958 and 1962. Only one team had done it before (Italy, 1934 and 1938), and nobody has done it since. But if any side has the capacity to repeat the feat, it is the current generation of French talent.

Besides boasting incredible strength in depth, they have the sort of winning mentality, organisation and on-field leaders which the best of the rest in Europe can only dream of. In Kylian Mbappe they have a genius in their midst with time very much on his side; the forward will turn 24 in Qatar. Didier Deschamps may not be the most progressive coach, but he knows how to assemble a well-drilled unit. Since Russia they have suffered just two defeats – most recently in a friendly to Group D rivals Finland – yet the idea of them failing to top their pool is absurd.

The same can be said of FIFA's current No.1 ranked side, Belgium. The *Diables Rouges* usually excel in qualifying, but need a trophy to prove they truly are the real deal. If they fail to win the Euros, their "Golden Generation" – Eden Hazard, Romelu Lukaku and Kevin De Bruyne – will see Qatar as their last chance.

Portugal, Europe's reigning champions and another serial qualifier, appear even more formidable than their golden days of 2016. In normal circumstances, coach Fernando Santos might look to this new campaign as a chance to ease out his elder statesmen and usher in a new era, led by Bruno Fernandes, Ruben Dias, Diogo Jota, Joao Felix and Ruben Neves. But Joao Moutinho, Jose Fonte and Pepe will be needed until the summer at least, while the squad's other veteran, Cristiano Ronaldo, is anything but normal. There is every chance he will still be leading the team in Qatar, at the ripe old age of 37.

Criminally absent from the last World Cup, Italy are very much on the mend. *Azzurri* boss Roberto Mancini has done an excellent job of re-floating a once sinking ship, bringing more clarity and structure to the team's play, promoting a string of youngsters and reconnecting with the fans. If Euro 2020 comes too soon for the likes of Sandro Tonali, Nicolo Zaniolo and Moise Kean, this campaign will give them time to mature.

Their biggest obstacle in Group C will be Switzerland who, for some reason, never seem to receive the credit they deserve. Well-organised, hard to beat and opportunistic, they are worth much more than the sum of their parts, and have reached the last three World Cups.

Like Mancini, Gareth Southgate also has a string of exciting youngsters to blood over the next 20 months, with Phil Foden and Bukayo Saka the standouts. Not since 1994 have England failed to reach a World Cup, and it's hard to imagine that sequence not being extended to seven consecutive qualifications, with a front-line of Harry Kane, Marcus Rashford, Raheem Sterling and Jadon Sancho. The less impressive defence should not be asked too many troubling questions in Group I.

Germany fans are a perplexed community at the moment. A team containing a host of Bayern Munich stars, plus top-quality midfielders Toni Kroos and Ilkay Gundogan and several up-and-coming youngsters, should be on fire. Yet the *Nationalmannschaft* has veered off course recently, eliminated at the group phase of the 2018 World Cup and only winning three of their eight games in 2020. Joachim Low, due to celebrate 15 years in charge this July, may not survive to see this campaign through to its conclusion. The pressure is already on following November's 6-0 defeat to Spain, and will be cranked up with anything less than a 100 per cent start to qualifying. Fail in the summer, and his time will surely be up.

Meanwhile in Spain, the dominant team of 2008-12 is a thing of the past, yet a renaissance is underway, led by Manchester City winger Ferran Torres, RB Leipzig forward Dani Olmo and Athletic Bilbao keeper Unai Simon.

THE CHALLENGERS

While qualification for Euro 2020 was proof that the *Oranje* were back on the right lines after their 2016 and 2018 failures, they do still have weak points. Defensive midfield and full-back are issues, as is the attack, where Memphis Depay is the only performer of genuine international class. Reservations about new coach Frank de Boer persist, with his marked lack of success at Inter, Crystal Palace and Atlanta United a concern. They can't be regarded as automatic qualifiers again just yet.

Leader...Gini Wijnaldum has been key to the Netherlands' rejuvenation

2018 World Cup finalists Croatia still have a surfeit of technical brilliance and attacking precision, with Hoffenheim striker Andrej Kramaric ably supported by Marcelo Brozovic, Ante Rebic and Ivan Perisic. The biggest question mark is over the man who links it all together: Luka Modric. The skipper withdrew from international selection in September, shortly after his 35th birthday, and there is every chance he will hang up his international boots after the summer.

Turkey underscored their ability to mix it at the top by taking four points from their two Euro 2020 qualifiers against France. All credit to coach Senol Gunes, in his second spell in charge of the team, who has created a side that is pragmatic, disciplined and aggressive, with an intense pressing game and a selection of rehearsed set-plays. A good summer showing will be a timely boost in their quest to reach the World Cup for the first time since finishing third in 2002.

> **No team or coach can be sure what state they'll be in on the other side of the Euros...making a good start has never been more important**

THE UNDERDOGS

As long as Robert Lewandowski is on board, Poland can never be discounted. Lewandowski has a decent backing band too, including clever Napoli midfielder Piotr Zielinski, Marseille centre-forward Arkadiusz Milik, Southampton centre-back Jan Bednarek and Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny.

Since making the last 16 at France '98, Norway have failed to make the finals of no fewer than five World Cups. However, the simultaneous emergence of a gaggle of young guns – striker Erling Haaland (Dortmund), midfielders Sander Berge (Sheffield United) and Martin Odegaard (Arsenal), and winger Jens Petter Hauge (Milan) – points to a brighter future.

Once a great striker with Dynamo Kiev and Milan, Andriy Shevchenko is proving to be equally impressive as the coaching brains of a rejuvenated Ukraine, leading the *Zbirna* to an unbeaten first-place finish in their Euro 2020 qualifying group. Shevchenko has transformed the side out of all recognition, solidifying them as a defensive force, encouraging his full-backs to push on, insisting on a high tempo and often confusing opponents with his use of a false nine. Atalanta attacking midfielder Ruslan Malinovskyi is a key figure.

Russia, quarter-finalists on home soil in 2018, would arguably be even better if coach Stanislav Cherchesov was not so conservative, often too reluctant to release the handbrake and still wary of introducing young talent. One individual to keep an eye on is the fast-improving Roman Zobnin, who tends to play as a dynamic defensive midfielder for Russia, while grafting and probing on the right for Spartak Moscow.

For all of March's 2022 World Cup qualifying fixtures, turn to page 97.

Rising stars... can Odegaard and Haaland guide Norway to their first World Cup finals since 1998?

THE DRAW

GROUP A
Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Portugal, Rep. Ireland, Serbia

GROUP B
Georgia, Greece, Kosovo, Spain, Sweden

GROUP C
Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, N. Ireland, Switzerland

GROUP D
Bosnia-Herzegovina, Finland, France, Kazakhstan, Ukraine

GROUP E
Belarus, Belgium, Czech Rep., Estonia, Wales

GROUP F
Austria, Denmark, Faroe Islands, Israel, Moldova, Scotland

GROUP G
Gibraltar, Latvia, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Turkey

GROUP H
Croatia, Cyprus, Malta, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia

GROUP I
Albania, Andorra, England, Hungary, Poland, San Marino

GROUP J
Armenia, Germany, Iceland, Liechtenstein, N.Macedonia, Romania

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

€19m

Sum that Marcelo Bielsa is suing his former club Lille for in damages and severance pay following his departure in 2017.

500

Serie A appearances by Samir Handanovic, with the Inter goalkeeper becoming the 15th player to reach the milestone in the league.

0.23

Crystal Palace's xG against Brighton – the lowest total for a winning side in the Premier League this season.

€631m

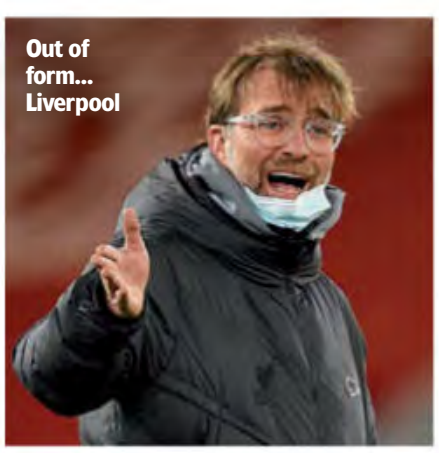
According to the *Football Observatory*, Manchester City have the highest net spend of any team in Europe's top five leagues over the last five years.

€191m

At the other end of that scale are Ligue 1 outfit Lille, who have made almost €200m in profit.

5

Liverpool lost five consecutive home games for the first time in their history, scoring just once in the process.



Out of form... Liverpool

300 club... Romelu Lukaku

300

Career goals for striker Romelu Lukaku after he scored twice in Inter's 3-1 victory over Lazio.

£4.3m

The fee that Liverpool have been ordered to pay Fulham for Harvey Elliott by a tribunal – a new record for a 16-year-old.

3488km

The distance between Oslo and Malaga, where Norway will play their "home" 2022 World Cup qualifiers in March.

10

The number of clubs set to feature in this year's Copa America following withdrawals by Qatar and Australia.

15

With victory over Swansea, Manchester City recorded their 15th successive domestic win, surpassing the joint-record for a top-flight English club of 14 held by Preston (1891-92) and Arsenal (1987-88).

50

The number of teams that will play in the CONCACAF Champions League from the 2023-24 season, expanding from 16.

2

The Libyan Football League announced its return after a two-year absence.

20

Jadon Sancho became the youngest player ever to score 35 Bundesliga goals – aged 20 years, 10 months and 26 days.

600

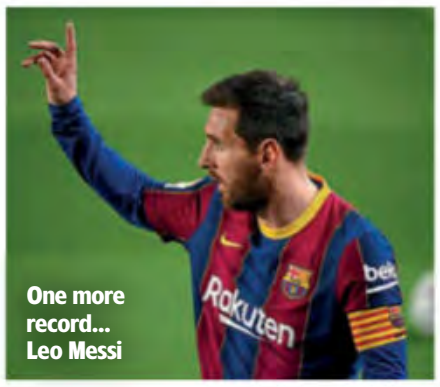
Cristiano Ronaldo marked his 600th league appearance with his 20th Serie A goal of the season.

2

Copa del Rey finals for Athletic Bilbao. The Basques reached the final once again this season, but are still waiting to play last season's final against Real Sociedad.

506

La Liga appearances for Lionel Messi, taking him above Xavi's record for Barca in the league.



One more record... Leo Messi

4

Arrests made of Barcelona officials as part of the investigation into "Barcagate". All four men were later released.

Wonderkid... Jadon Sancho

Basque Country

STEVE MENARY

Euskadi...the Basque national team line up for their clash with Costa Rica

Freedom fighters

The Basque national team's quest for recognition

After rejecting the Dutch Caribbean island of Bonaire, the likelihood of FIFA accepting a significantly more controversial application from the Basque Football Federation (BFF) was always unlikely.

Known as the "Euskadi", the Basque XI has a long history. They took on reigning Olympic football champions Uruguay back in 1922 and played a series of tour games during the Spanish Civil War, but didn't play again until after the death of General Franco, the Spanish dictator.

In 1978, the Spanish constitution was changed to create 17 autonomous communities. The Basques, Catalonia and Galicia began to play regular friendlies against other international sides. Since drawing 0-0 with the Soviet Union at Athletic Bilbao's San Mames stadium, the Euskadi have played swathes of full FIFA members, often winning.

The most recent game was a 2-1 win in November 2020 over Costa Rica with Athletic Bilbao centre back Unai Nunez getting a stoppage-time winner.

The Euskadi selection drew heavily on Athletic Bilbao, whose captain Iker Muniain netted the opener. Osasuna midfielder Roberto Torres, Real Sociedad's Ander Guevara, Anaitz Arbilla of Eibar and Alaves midfielder Manu Garcia also played, while overseas-based players such as Mikel San Jose of Birmingham City featured previously.

Javier Clemente took charge for the Costa Rica match, which was played at an empty San Mames due to coronavirus, but games normally attract big crowds and the BFF claim there is widespread support for a separate team.

"It is something our society asks for; it is not something new, it is something we long for. And we have the support of our [Basque] government," says vice-president Nerea Zalabarria.

> "It is something our society asks for; it is not something new, it is something we long for"
>
> Basque Football Federation vice-president Nerea Zalabarria

The BFF had discussed joining since the 1970s. After a landslide vote in favour in 2018, the BFF eventually made an official application at the end of last year, when Zalabarria and BFF president Luis Maria Elustondo joined lawyer David Salinas-Armendariz and Jon Redondo, director of physical activity and sports at the Basque Government, on a trip to Switzerland.

New FIFA members need to be a member of a regional confederation first and the party visited FIFA in Zurich and UEFA in Nyon.

Zalabarria adds: "We wanted to proceed in a soft manner, we wanted to have as much support from different institutions and then COVID appeared. We thought we could apply at the same time; moreover, considering the difficulties we have now to travel, we thought it could be the best.

"They do not agree and sent our document to the [Spanish federation] RFEF. And the RFEF has sent us a letter; now we are working on how to respond to it."

To secure UEFA or FIFA membership, the Basques needs the permission of the RFEF or to be recognised as independent by the United Nations. Both are unlikely. Taking part in Euro or World Cup qualifiers seems impossible and the Euskadi does not have any senior male fixtures lined up yet for 2021 due to coronavirus.

A less controversial route could be to provide opposition for teams staging training camps in the Basque Country prior to major international finals, a route that Catalonia pursued before the drive for political independence escalated. Given the quality of players making themselves available for the Euskadi, this could be the future – albeit not the one that the BFF wants.

Javier Clemente... the ex-Athletic Bilbao player and coach now manages the Euskadi

JANUARY 30-FEBRUARY 26, 2021

Global diary

Stories from the four corners of the football world

Saturday January 30

SAUDI ARABIA: Al Nassr claim their second consecutive Saudi Super Cup title after defeating Al Hilal 3-0 at the King Fahd International Stadium.
BRAZIL: In an all-Brazilian final, Palmeiras beat Santos 1-0 to win the 2020 Copa Libertadores, with Breno Lopes scoring the winner nine minutes into stoppage time.
SOUTH AFRICA: In the Soweto derby, Orlando Pirates defeat arch-rivals Kaizer Chiefs 2-1.

Sunday January 31

FRANCE: PSG concede two goals in the last ten minutes to lose 3-2 at Lorient, while Lille maintain their title pursuit with a 1-0 win over Dijon.
NETHERLANDS: In a big day at the top of the Eredivisie, Ajax beat AZ 3-0, while Feyenoord win 3-1 at home to PSV.
SPAIN: Lionel Messi scores his 650th goal for Barcelona in a 2-1 La Liga win over Athletic Bilbao.

Monday February 1

PORTUGAL: Sporting win the Lisbon derby against Benfica with a winner in the 92nd minute from Matheus Nunes, extending their season unbeaten run and their lead at the top of the league.
USA: A United States side featuring only MLS players thrash Trinidad & Tobago 7-0 in a friendly.

Tuesday February 2

ENGLAND: Southampton suffer their second 9-0 defeat in consecutive seasons, with Manchester United running riot this time at Old Trafford.
GERMANY: Fourth-tier side Rot-Weiss Essen stun Bayer Leverkusen in the German Cup, winning 2-1 after extra-time.
ITALY: Cristiano Ronaldo scores twice as Juventus come from behind to beat Internazionale 2-1 in the Coppa Italia.

Wednesday February 3

ROMANIA: In the Bucharest derby, FCSB beat Dinamo 1-0.
URUGUAY: The Uruguayan *Clasico* ends goalless between Penarol ➤

Caribbean

LASANA LIBURD

All at sea

World Cup qualifying begins as Caribbean nations grapple with pandemic issues

"COVID-19 has further exacerbated the difference between the minnows and the maestros in world football," says St. Lucia men's national senior team coach Jamaal Shabazz.

In the Caribbean, the World Cup qualifying campaign is easily the most illustrious competition that most islanders get to see. It is the only time that fully professional players from nations like Mexico, the United States and Costa Rica turn up at the arrivals lounge.

For the Qatar 2022 World Cup qualifying series though, the region's hopes of glorious contests against CONCACAF's top guns look gloomy, as football has taken a backseat to the pandemic. At the moment, "the beautiful game" is in the trunk.

All over the world, business has made concessions to the coronavirus. The problem is, in the Caribbean, football is considered an amateur past time by most regional governments – and receives precious few exemptions to operate.

Caribbean Football Union (CFU) president Randy Harris, who heads an organisation that accounts for 25 of CONCACAF's 35 FIFA-recognised football nations, is afraid that the region may be half-baked when competitive action kicks off in March.

"From the first round, the World Cup qualifiers are usually broadcast and it gives players the opportunity to show their worth," said Harris, who is also president of the Barbados Football Association (BFA). "If they are not properly prepared, they may not be able to exhibit their real quality...we have to find new ways to handle this situation."

The problem is three-fold. First, most of the islands – unlike the rest of the world – have not had domestic football since March 2020. Domestic football is not a money-spinner in the Caribbean and often does not draw heavy spectator interest in the way that regional cricket does, so governments have not made allowances for its resumption.

Coaches, as such, have a tricky balancing act as they attempt to blend non-competitive local-based players with their active overseas-based counterparts. It was at least part of the issue on February 1, when Trinidad & Tobago head coach Terry Fenwick took a patchwork team to Orlando to face a second-string USA outfit. They were mauled 7-0, a record-equalling defeat for the twin-island republic.

Trinidad & Tobago, like Haiti, are under the thumb of FIFA-appointed normalisation committees, after differing issues brought the nations in conflict with the global governing body.

Mauling...USA celebrate during their 7-0 victory over Trinidad & Tobago

"Everybody [from the other Caribbean nations] who laughed at Fenwick, they'd better be prepared to face the same situation according to who they play," said Shabazz.

The second issue is team preparation. An upshot of amateur leagues is that most Caribbean national coaches usually get more training time with their players throughout the year. Yet differing COVID-19 protocols on the islands have created an uneven playing field in that regard.

Barbados, for instance, suspended all sport and instituted a nationwide curfew after a spike of 70 cases at the start of February – on an island of just over 287,000 people.

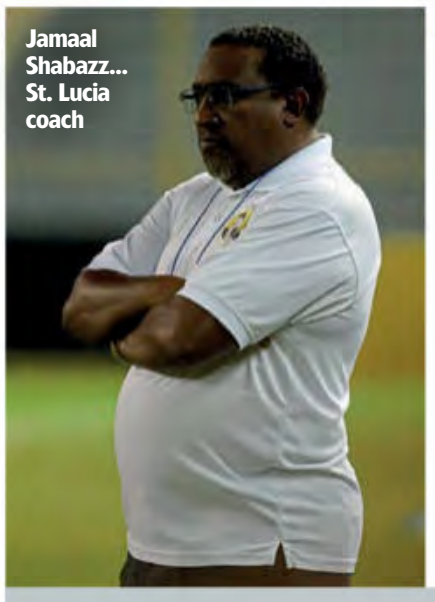
On the other hand, Dominica, who share Group D with Barbados and have a negligible infection rate, have had a core of 27 players training for five days a week since the start of the year, under head coach Rajesh Latchoo.

The third and most serious issue regards travel and quarantine.

A new FIFA missive states that clubs are not obliged to release players if they are subjected to more than five days quarantine during an international match window. In the Caribbean, the standard quarantine period is 14 days – and as yet there is no sign that regional governments are prepared to bend for football.

So how can FAs manage when they are expected to play home and away fixtures within three days of each other?

For Shabazz, the uncertainty reflects a crisis of leadership. He noted that the Caribbean Premier



Jamaal Shabazz... St. Lucia coach

Playing again...the Dominican Republic league is one of the only Caribbean islands without a mandatory quarantine period

"Coaches get fired for not getting results, players get dropped for non-performance. What yardstick do we use to measure the performance of our administrators?"

St. Lucia coach, Jamaal Shabazz

League (CPL) cricket tournament and the Cricket West Indies (CWI) were able to find solutions by engaging with regional governments.

The CFU, in his opinion, was not nearly as proactive.

"I understand this is not a cut-and-dry issue and we have to come up with plausible medical options," said the St. Lucia coach. "For instance, I think the CFU could have engaged the services of two private epidemiologists for advice and let everyone contribute to that investment. This was an opportunity to work together as a Caribbean people for a solution.

"Coaches get fired for not getting results, players get dropped for non-performance. What yardstick do we use to measure the performance of our administrators?"

Some nations have found short-term solutions. The Dominican Republic, which shares Group D with Panama, Dominica, Anguilla and, ironically, Barbados, does not have a mandatory quarantine period for travellers. So, the five nations agreed to play all of their March qualifiers on that island.

Harris said the COVID dilemma was a matter best resolved by individual nations, rather than Caricom.

"We can only appeal to our individual nations because COVID protocols are different in some countries than it is in others," said Harris.

Harris pointed out that CONCACAF and CFU have held meetings on the issue and he was not about to point fingers.

"There has been talk of withdrawals by some nations but we still have some time to go, and maybe a number of them can get something in place with the co-operation of their respective [political] leaders," said Harris. "Normally if you forfeit your games there is a penalty but we are making appeals to FIFA that, under the circumstances, maybe that can be reconsidered.

"I think FIFA and CONCACAF have already done us favours by rescheduling the games. This is the third time already, and because of the magnitude of the World Cup they just can't continue doing it.

"The World Cup is next year and there must be qualification for it. So it is up to us now to find a way."

Harris still hopes the Caribbean's current flag-bearers can challenge for a spot in Qatar. Jamaica and Haiti were losing semi-finalists at the 2019 Gold Cup while Jamaica were runners-up in 2015 and 2017.

"When we look at Jamaica, who are always up there, and Haiti and their performances in recent times, I'd expect good performances from them," said Harris. "And you also have to watch out for Curacao who now have Guus Hiddink as their coach with the experience that he brings to the table.

"Those three nations have the majority of their players paying outside of the Caribbean, so they will not be as affected as some of the other nations in the region."

Preparation and co-ordination remain key for the Caribbean. Trinidad & Tobago's recent excursion to the United States shows what may lie in store if they get it wrong.

Flag-bearers... Jamaica were beaten by USA in the 2019 Gold Cup semi-finals

Africa

MARK GLEESON

African Nations Championship wrap-up

Morocco come out on top in competition for domestic-based players

The completion of a first major tournament since the onset of COVID-19 is a feather in the cap of African football. But the jury is still out on whether the African Nations Championship (CHAN) really serves any purpose or has much of a future in an increasingly crowded calendar.

The 16-team tournament is contested by national teams made up only of home-based players and is designed to give opportunity to those denied international football by the growing number of overseas-based professionals who dominate the ranks of Africa's national teams.

It is also an indicator of sorts as to who has the strongest league on the continent and Morocco's successful defence of their title is evidence of the quality of their domestic competition.

But Egypt do not enter this competition, South Africa compete despite the refusal of clubs to release all but their fringe squad players and Tunisia withdrew from this event. The poverty of quality left behind in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, who suffer such a drain of talent to Europe, is evidenced by the fact both lost at the first hurdle in the qualification.

But there was still plenty of excitement about the tournament, which was also a test event for Cameroon, hosts of the next Africa Cup of Nations in January 2022.

The CHAN finals were originally scheduled for April last year, and were an early casualty of the worldwide shutdown last year.

By that time Cameroon had stepped in as hosts

Champions... Morocco celebrate with their trophy

Hosts...Cameroon finished fourth on home soil, losing 4-0 to Morocco in the semi-finals

Man of the Competition... Soufiane Rahimi

to replace Ethiopia, who had not been able to build stadia in time.

Secessionists from the English-speaking part of Cameroon had, on the eve of the kick off, threatened to disrupt the event but it was COVID-19 that proved much more of a threat.

And again, as had been the case in January's African Champions League qualifying round, there were accusations that positive COVID tests were manufactured to deprive teams of players. The Democratic Republic of Congo, in particular, were hit by a round of dubious test results which ruled out 12 players and coach Florent Ibenge for some of the games, although they overcame the alleged gamesmanship to still win their group.

DR Congo were past double winners of the CHAN but this time were not in the class of Morocco, who beat Mali 2-0 in the final in Yaounde's Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium, dominating from the start but missing early chances.

But in the second half, after Morocco had a legitimate-looking penalty denied despite the Kenyan referee consulting VAR, Mali should have opened the scoring through Moussa Kone.

Morocco's superiority was finally confirmed after 69 minutes when centre-back Soufiane Bouftini headed home from a corner and then ten minutes later Ayoub El Kaabi scored his 12th goal across the last two tournaments.

Morocco had six players in their squad who were also part of their victory at the last CHAN, which they hosted in 2018.

Goalkeeper Anas Zniti, centre-midfielder Yahya Jabrane, attacking-midfielders Walid El Karti and Abdelilah Hafidi, winger Zakaria Hadraf and centre-forward El Kaabi brought considerable experience to the event and showed their quality through the first round group phase and into the knockout stage.

Morocco won Group C, scored twice inside the opening eight minutes to beat Zambia 3-1 in the quarter-final and thrashed the hosts 4-0 in the semi-final. Tournament top scorer Soufiane Rahimi from Raja Casablanca was named player of the tournament (or "Man of the Competition" as CAF ridiculously labelled him) for his five goals.

Mali had finished above Cameroon in their opening round group but then needed penalty shootouts in both the quarter-final against Congo and semi-final against Guinea to advance to the decider.

Morocco's successful defence of their title is evidence of the quality of their domestic competition

Home team Cameroon were denied the bronze medal as they lost 2-0 to Guinea in the third place play-off match after expelling their experienced striker Yannick Njeng from their squad on the eve of the last game. He had a bitter, and public, confrontation with assistant coach David Pagou after being taken off during the semi-final.

The field in Cameroon also included Libya, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where there has been no domestic competition. Libya's league has been hampered for years by the civil strife in the country: Namibia have had no league for two years as the result of a dispute between clubs and the football association and Zimbabwean clubs have not kicked a ball in anger since the lockdown was declared last March.

The next edition of CHAN will be held in Algeria in January 2023 with five separate venues scheduled to host games.

Sent off...Mali's Issa Samake (L) was shown a second yellow card late on in the final

➤ and Nacional, with both sides having players sent off.

HUNGARY: League leaders Ferencvaros win 4-0 away at arch-rivals Ujpest.

IRAN: Former Iran international Ali Ansarian passes away at the age of 43 after being hospitalised with coronavirus.

Thursday February 4

URUGUAY: Former Uruguay Under-20 international and Godoy Cruz striker Santiago Garcia is found dead in his apartment with a gunshot wound aged 30.

Friday February 5

BRAZIL: Flamengo continue their pursuit of the title by beating Rio rivals Vasco da Gama 2-0.

Saturday February 6

TURKEY: Mesut Ozil makes his home debut for Fenerbahce, coming off the bench in a 1-0 defeat to Galatasaray in the Intercontinental derby.

Sunday February 7

ITALY: Milan beat Crotone 4-0 to move back to the top of Serie A, with Zlatan Ibrahimovic surpassing 500 career club goals.

FRANCE: Kylian Mbappe and Mauro Icardi are on the scoresheet as PSG beat Marseille 2-0 away in *Le Classique*.

AFRICA: Morocco win the African Nations Championship (CHAN) for the second time by overcoming Mali 2-0 in a thrilling final at the Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium in Yaounde, Cameroon.

CHILE: Mario Osben, former Chile goalkeeper who played at the 1982 World Cup, passes away.

Monday February 8

QATAR: Bayern Munich beat Al Ahly 2-0 in the Club World Cup semi-final.

SPAIN: La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid suffer a setback, conceding a last-minute equaliser in a 2-2 draw with Celta Vigo.

Tuesday February 9

ITALY: Juventus secure their place in the final of the Coppa Italia by drawing the second leg with Internazionale 0-0.

ENGLAND: Burnley's blushes are spared after opponents Bournemouth point out that they had picked suspended defender Erik Pieters to start their FA Cup tie at Turf Moor. ➤

Wednesday February 10

➤ **NETHERLANDS:** Sebastien Haller scores twice as Ajax beat PSV in the KNVB Cup last eight.
ROMANIA: Dinamo Bucharest get their revenge over FCSB in the Romanian Cup, winning 1-0.
WALES: Dai Davies, former Everton, Wrexham and Wales goalkeeper, passes away.
SPAIN: Real Madrid announce the death of their former European Cup-winning defender Pachin.

Thursday February 11

QATAR: Bayern Munich win the Club World Cup with a 1-0 victory over Tigres of Mexico.
CHILE: Universidad Catolica win their third consecutive league title.

Friday February 12

GERMANY: RB Leipzig maintain their pursuit of Bayern Munich with a 2-1 win over Augsburg.

Saturday February 13

ITALY: Milan slip up again in the Serie A title race, losing 2-0 away to Spezia. Elsewhere, Napoli beat Juventus 1-0.
ENGLAND: Leicester City win 3-1 against Liverpool with keeper Alisson making another costly error following his meltdown a week prior against Manchester City, while City continue their march to the title by thrashing Tottenham 3-0.

Sunday February 14

ITALY: Former Serie A referee Maurizio Mattei dies.

Monday February 15

GERMANY: Bayern Munich come from 3-1 down to draw 3-3 with Arminia Bielefeld, ceding ground in the title race to RB Leipzig.

Tuesday February 16

EUROPE: Kylian Mbappe scores a hat-trick in PSG's 4-1 Champions League victory over Barcelona at the Nou Camp. Liverpool also secure a valuable away win, beating RB Leipzig 2-0 in Budapest, Hungary.

Wednesday February 17

EUROPE: Still in the Champions League, Porto dominate Juventus at home yet only win 2-1, with Federico Chiesa scoring a valuable away goal late on. In the night's other tie, Sevilla and Borussia Dortmund share five goals as the German side win 3-2 in Spain. ➤

Singapore

JOHN DUERDEN

Rising force

Big-spending Lion City Sailors are bidding to become Singapore's first super club

There can't be many countries where the transfer record has increased by over 6,000 per cent with just one deal; but that's what happened in Singapore in January. Before then the record stood at £27,000, the amount that Hougang United paid to Tampines Rovers for Fazrul Nawaz in 2018. Now it stands at £1.65 million, as Lion City Sailors bought Diego Lopes from Rio Ave in Portugal.

"It's good for the SPL, after so long someone is coming in with a huge price tag and anyone who is coming in at $3m has to be good," Noh Alam Shah, team manager at Lion City's Singapore Premier League (SPL) rivals Tanjong Pagar United, said.

That remains to be seen but it is true that expectations are high, especially as the club have also signed 2019 Player of the Year Faris Ramli, and Brazilian defender Jorge Fellipe from Saudi Arabia.

There is more to the story than a club spending big. For the first time there is serious money in Singapore football and it comes from Forrest Li, the seventh-richest man in the country with a fortune estimated to be around £3.83 billion. Born in China and educated in the United States at Stanford University, he came to Singapore and set up Sea Group, a company specialising in e-commerce, gaming and digital payments. In February 2020,

Owner... Forrest Li (L) took charge of the club last year

Coach...Australian Aurelio Vidmar has been in charge since 2019

Marquee signing... Diego Lopes scored seven goals for Rio Ave last season

he bought Home United, one of Singapore's leading football clubs. The name was changed to Lion City Sailors and waves have been made ever since.

"As a football fan myself, I believe that Singapore deserves to have a world-class football ecosystem and world-class teams," Li said in a first address to fans in February last year.

"We have a clear goal in mind, to build Lion City Sailors into the pride of Singapore. Off the field, we want to build an even stronger football community... and we want to light a spark that will ignite all of Singapore football."

It is necessary. The SPL, known as the S-League until 2018, has stagnated in recent years. In a country of six million, attendance barely reaches four figures, while the national team has faded as a regional force. With leagues in Malaysia and Thailand more attractive to fans and more lucrative for players, Singapore football needs a boost.

A club with money should make a difference. In a league where clubs have traditionally been registered as state charities which doesn't always encourage a focus on marketing, community relations and all the rest, Lion City have become the first fully-privatised club. If others can follow suit then that will be a step forward in itself.

In the short-term, Li has stated that his desire is to get into the AFC Champions League. This is easier from this year as the tournament has expanded from 32 teams to 40, giving Singapore a team in the group stage for the first time in a decade. Playing against teams from the rest of Southeast Asia and the wider continent would also do Sea Group's business and brand no harm.

The big question is whether Li will have bigger ambitions. He was there when Steve Jobs gave a famous graduation speech at Stanford in 2005. "Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do." Jobs summed up by saying: "Stay hungry, stay foolish."

Buying a European club may be foolish, but Li has already had to field questions as to whether he is interested. He has done his best now to answer

> "We have a clear goal in mind, to build Lion City Sailors into the pride of Singapore"
>
> Club owner Forrest Li

Faris Ramli... the Singapore international joined Lion City Sailors

and such reticence is understandable given the very mixed examples of businesspeople from Southeast Asia who have invested in the big leagues.

Singaporean Peter Lim bought a 70 per cent stake in Valencia in 2014 but probably regrets it now due to his deep unpopularity among fans of the Spanish giants who accuse him of being responsible for a lack of funds and competence. Vincent Tan's time with Cardiff City has been more of a roller coaster, with the Malaysian overseeing two promotions and relegations.

Yet in Leicester City there is genuine affection for King Power-owning Srivaddhanaprabha family. The Thais took over the club in the second tier in 2010 and 11 years on, the Foxes are in the hunt for a UEFA Champions League spot with the 2016 Premier League title still fresh in the memory.

Plenty for Li to think about then, but the first target is the 2021 Singapore title. Anything less will be a disappointment. Whether there is anything more in the future remains to be seen.

Turkey

JAMES KELLY

Debt and decline

One of Turkey's most historic clubs are on the brink

Braian Samudio tried to swap his shirt with Bugra Cagliyan, but the Eskisehirspor player pushed him away.

Having lost 3-0 to Rizespor, the 16-year-old's actions were not those of a petulant teenager. Nor was he concerned about coronavirus.

"When I saw the video, I thought he did it because he did not have another one", says Arslan Kurt, an Eskisehir local.

After footage went viral, Eskisehirspor issued a statement asserting they did not have a shortage of shirts. A picture later emerged of Samudio with Bugra's kit, but many remained unconvinced.

Eskisehirspor are currently in debt to the tune of 234 million Turkish Lira (around €26 million). Players have not been paid for several months. For a while the training ground had no hot water, while vehicles registered in the club's name were recently revealed to have been bought from a scrapyard.

Their fall is not unique in Turkey. It features all the trademarks of the recent declines of Karabukspor, Mersin and Orduspor: years of financial mismanagement, underperforming foreign recruits and a lack of trust in academy players.

However, Eskisehirspor, founded in 1965, are one of Turkey's most historic clubs. They were the first to challenge the dominance of Istanbul's "Big Three", finishing runners-up in the league three times between 1969 and 1972. They also won the Turkish Cup in 1971, and the following season knocked Sevilla out of Europe. They are still one of only five clubs to finish in the top two on three occasions. In a country where footballing power is almost completely centralised in Istanbul, the side from Eskisehir are of great significance.

Or at least, they were.

Relegation in 1982 brought about the tumultuous existence the club has endured since. "ES-ES" fell as low as the third tier in the 1990s but recovered to qualify for Europe once again by 2012. What followed was a Europa League qualifier against Marseille, and narrow defeat to Galatasaray in the Turkish Cup final two years later.

Around this time was when problems began. Key players such as Alper Potuk, Erkan Zengin

Downfall... fans during the 2014 Turkish Cup final, a 1-0 defeat to Galatasaray

Thursday February 18

➤ **EUROPE:** Ten-man Red Star Belgrade score a 93rd-minute equaliser in the first leg of their Europa League clash with Milan. Manchester United thrash Real Sociedad 4-0 in Turin and Tottenham beat Wolfsberger 4-1, while Young Boys and Bayer Leverkusen serve up a classic, with the hosts winning 4-3 thanks to a last-minute winner.

Friday February 19

FRANCE: Lyon return to the top of Ligue 1 with a 3-2 victory over Brest, moving ahead of Lille on goal difference, and just a point above PSG in third.

PORTUGAL: Sporting score twice in the last five minutes of their Portuguese League Cup semi-final to beat Porto 2-1.

Saturday February 20

ENGLAND: Everton end their wait for a victory at Anfield, with Richarlison and Gylfi Sigurdsson scoring in a 2-0 victory.

GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund come out comfortable winners in the Revierderby, thumping Schalke 4-0 thanks to a brace from Erling Haaland.

RUSSIA: Dynamo Moscow win 2-0 against rivals Spartak Moscow.

TAJIKISTAN: Tajikistan's footballing powerhouse Istiklol begin 2021 the way they ended 2020, lifting the country's first piece of silverware of the new season, the TFF Cup.

Sunday February 21

ENGLAND: West Ham United move into the top four by winning 2-1 against London rivals Tottenham, while Raheem Sterling scores in a 1-0 win for Manchester City over Arsenal.

SCOTLAND: Rangers take another step towards lifting the Scottish Premiership title by beating Dundee United 4-1, while Celtic lose 1-0 at Ross County.

SPAIN: Barcelona suffer a setback in their recovery, failing to win for the first time in seven games in a 1-1 draw with Cadiz.

Europa League... Eskisehirspor held Marseille to a 1-1 draw in 2012

Costly...the club are banned from transfers over unpaid wages to ex-goalie Ruud Boffin

In a country where footballing power is almost completely centralised in Istanbul, the side from Eskisehir are of great significance. Or at least, they were

and Veysel Sari were sold, with replacements disappointing. In 2015-16 Eskisehirspor brought in a remarkable 26 players – including former Celtic midfielder Nadir Ciftci and Greek international Theofanis Gekas – but were relegated from the Turkish Super Lig.

Many point the finger at former president Mesut Hoscan and his Once Guven group. Translating into English as "Trust First" – the slogan they used – this group was entrusted with campaigning for Hoscan. They are accused of money laundering and murky political ties.

"Trust First acted as if they had come to shut the club down", says Murat Diri, leader of the Nefer ultras and Eskisehirspor Fans Union (ETB). "These people damaged Eskisehirspor. They robbed the club and left. Mesut Hoscan acted with them, he is the black stain of the club."

Disgraced...Mesut Hoscan became club president in 2016

Up to 20 players from Hoscan's presidency have since filed claims against Eskisehirspor for unpaid wages. Ghanaian defender Jerry Akaminko is owed €1m alone. Meanwhile ex-Germany international David Odonkor wants €80,000, despite only spending two weeks at the club and never making a first-team appearance.

Ahead of the 2019-20 season, Eskisehirspor were deducted 15 points for various other financial irregularities. Last season they finished bottom of the second tier, only being spared the drop by COVID-19. At the time of writing, they have only won one league game out of 24 this term.

Epitomising their turmoil, in 2019 they went through four different presidents. The latest man to take the poisoned chalice is Mustafa Akgoren, the owner of an auto-brake shop.

He recently told a press conference: "We aspire to the mission to keep Eskisehirspor alive, to not close the club and save the honour of the city. We struggle day and night to pay for our expenses."

Akgoren is supported by city governor Erol Ayyildiz. He has promised to fulfil a similar role as Kemal Unakitan, Turkey's late finance minister, who greatly assisted in the club's revival during the early 2000s.

However, today the club are under a two-window transfer ban, which was imposed last April as punishment for failure to pay another former player, Belgian goalkeeper Ruud Boffin.

Unable to recruit properly, this season Eskisehirspor have fielded a team with an average age of just 22. During the past six years the club have had 13 managers, with the latest, Ilhan Var, fired after just 88 days.

Akgoren and Ayyildiz do however represent a glimmer of hope for the future. Rumours abound the transfer ban is close to being paid off. The club's 35,000-seater stadium, opened in 2016, is one of the most modern in Turkey. There are also great expectations for Bugra, the midfielder at the centre of the shirt storm, who is a Turkey Under-16 international.

"If Ayyildiz, who is our only hope, does not protect the team, we cannot live any longer," Diri says. "But Eskisehirspor has been relegated many times before, we must not give up our fight."

ITALY: In a vital clash at the top of Serie A, Inter win the Milan derby 3-0 thanks to a cool brace from Lautaro Martinez and another from Romelu Lukaku to open up a four-point lead at the top of the table.
AUSTRIA: Patson Daka scores a hat-trick in a 4-2 win for RB Salzburg against Rapid Vienna at the top of the Bundesliga.
FRANCE: PSG lose 2-0 at home to Monaco to fall four points behind Lille, who win 4-1 at Lorient.

Monday February 22

ENGLAND: England women end their wait for a fixture by winning 6-0 versus Northern Ireland in Hege Riise's first game as interim boss.

Tuesday February 23

EUROPE: In the Champions League, Chelsea secure a vital first-leg away win over Atletico Madrid, with Olivier Giroud scoring in a 1-0 victory. In the night's other tie, holders Bayern Munich win 4-1 at Lazio.

Wednesday February 24

EUROPE: A first-half red card for Remo Freuler costs Atalanta in the first leg of their Champions League clash with Real Madrid, losing 1-0 to a Ferland Mendy goal. Elsewhere, Manchester City win 2-0 at Borussia Monchengladbach, while Tottenham complete an 8-1 aggregate Europa League win over Wolfsberger thanks to a Dele Alli bicycle kick.
SPAIN: Barcelona return to the top three of La Liga by beating Elche 3-0, with Lionel Messi scoring twice.

Thursday February 25

EUROPE: In the Europa League, Arsenal overcome Benfica thanks to a late goal from Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. Manchester United and Rangers join the Gunners in the last 16, although Leicester are knocked out by Slavia Prague.

Friday February 26

GERMANY: In spite of taking the lead, Eintracht Frankfurt suffer their first defeat of 2021, losing 2-1 away to Werder Bremen.

Club football

EUROPE

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2020-21

Round of 16 - Leg 1

Feb 16 - Barcelona
Barcelona 1 (Messi 27 pen)
PSG 4 (Mbappe 32, 65, 85, Kean 70)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Kuipers (Ned)

Feb 16 - Budapest
RB Leipzig 0
Liverpool 2 (Salah 53, Mane 58)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vincic (Svk)

Feb 17 - Porto
Porto 2 (Taremi 2, Marega 46)
Juventus 1 (Chiesa 82)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Cerro Grande (Esp)

Feb 17 - Seville
Sevilla 2 (Suso 7, De Jong 84)
B. Dortmund 3 (Dahoud 19, Haaland, 27, 43)
HT: 1-3. **Ref:** Makkelie (Ned)

Feb 23 - Bucharest
Atletico Madrid 0
Chelsea 1 (Giroud 68)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Brych (Ger)

Feb 23 - Rome
Lazio 1 (Correa 49)
Bayern Munich 4 (Lewandowski 9, Musiala 24, Sane 42, Acerbi 47 og)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Grinfeld (Isr)

Feb 24 - Bergamo
Atalanta 0
Real Madrid 1 (Mendy 86)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Stieler (Ger)

Feb 24 - Budapest
Borussia Monchengladbach 0
Manchester City 2 (B. Silva 29, Gabriel Jesus 65)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Soares Dias (Por)

EUROPA LEAGUE 2020-21

Round of 32 - Leg 1

Feb 18 - Kiev
Dynamo Kiev 1 (Buyalskiy 62)
Club Brugge 1 (Mechele 67)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gestranius (Fin)

Feb 18 - Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade 2 (Kanga 52 pen, Pavkov 90+3)
Milan 2 (Pankov 42 og, Hernandez 61 pen)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Sidiropoulos (Gre)

Feb 18 - Krasnodar
Krasnodar 2 (Berg 28, Claesson 69)
Dinamo Zagreb 3 (Petkovic 15, 54, Atiemwen 75)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Frankowski (Pol)

Feb 18 - Piraeus
Olympiakos 4 (Bouchalakis 9, M'Vila 37, El-Arabi 45+2, Masouras 83)
PSV 2 (Zahavi 14, 39)
HT: 3-2. **Ref:** Ekberg (Swe)

Feb 18 - Turin
Real Sociedad 0
Manchester United 4 (Bruno Fernandes 27, 57, Rashford 64, James 90)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Scharer (Sui)

Feb 18 - Budapest
Wolfsberger 1 (Liendl 55 pen)
Tottenham 4 (Son 13, Bale 28, Lucas 34, Vinicius 88)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Palabiyik (Tur)

Feb 18 - Prague
Slavia Prague 0
Leicester City 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Guida (Ita)

Feb 18 - Braga
Sporting Braga 0
Roma 2 (Dzeko 5, Mayoral 86)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Kovacs (Rou)

Feb 18 - Bern
Young Boys 4 (Fassnacht 3, Siebatcheu 19, 89, Elia 44)
Bayer Leverkusen 3 (Schick 49, 52, Diaby 68)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Mateu Lahoz (Esp)

Feb 18 - Rome
Benfica 1 (Pizzi 55 pen)
Arsenal 1 (Saka 57)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Cakir (Tur)

Feb 18 - Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg 0
Villarreal 2 (Alcacer 41, Nino 71)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Treimanis (Lva)

Feb 18 - Granada
Granada 2 (Herrera 19, Kenedy 21)
Napoli 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Karasev (Rus)

Feb 18 - Villeneuve-d'Ascq
Lille 1 (Weah 72)
Ajax 2 (Tadic 87 pen, Brobbey 89)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kruzliak (Svk)

Feb 18 - Tel Aviv
Maccabi Tel-Aviv 0
Shakhtar Donetsk 2 (A. Patrick 31, Tete 90+2)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Letexier (Fra)

Feb 18 - Villarreal
Molde 3 (Ellingsen 41, U. Andersen 70, Fofana 74)
Hoffenheim 3 (Dabbur 8, 28, Baumgartner 45+3)
HT: 1-3. **Ref:** Frappart (Fra)

Feb 18 - Antwerp
Antwerp 3 (Avenatti 45, Refaelov 45+8, Hongla 66)
Rangers 4 (Aribo 38, Barisic 59 pen, 90 pen, Kent 83)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Kabakov (Bul)

Round of 32 - Leg 2

Feb 24 - London
Tottenham 4 (8) (Alli 10, Vinicius 50, 83, Bale 73)
Wolfsberger 0 (1)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Jug (Svn)

Feb 25 - Amsterdam
Ajax 2 (4) (Klaassen 15, Neres 88)
Lille 1 (2) (Yazici 78 pen)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Collum (Sco)

Feb 25 - Piraeus
Arsenal 3 (4) (Aubameyang 21, 87, Tierney 67)
Benfica 2 (3) (Goncalves 43, Rafa Silva 61)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Kuipers (Ned)

Feb 25 - Naples
Napoli 2 (2) (Zielinski 3, Ruiz 59)
Granada 1 (3) (Montoro 25)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Siebert (Ger)

Feb 25 - Glasgow
Rangers 5 (9) (Morelos 9, Patterson 46, Kent 55, Barisic 79 pen, Itten 90+2 pen)
Antwerp 2 (5) (Refaelov 31, Lamkel Ze 57)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Raczkowski (Pol)

Feb 25 - Kiev
Shakhtar Donetsk 1 (3) (Junior Moraes 67 pen)
Maccabi Tel-Aviv 0 (0)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sanchez (Esp)

Feb 25 - Sinsheim
Hoffenheim 0 (3)
Molde 2 (5) (Andersen 19, 90+4)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Kulbakov (Blr)

Feb 25 - Villarreal
Villarreal 2 (4) (Moreno 40, 89 pen)
Red Bull Salzburg 1 (1) (Berisha 17)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Zwayer (Ger)

Feb 25 - Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen 0 (3)
Young Boys 2 (6) (Siebatcheu 47, Fassnacht 86)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Massa (Ita)

Feb 25 - Brugge
Club Brugge 0 (1)
Dynamo Kiev 1 (2) (Buyalskyi 83)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Jovanovic (Srb)

Feb 25 - Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb 1 (4) (Orsic 31)
Krasnodar 0 (2)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Meler (Tur)

Feb 25 - Leicester
Leicester City 0 (0)
Slavia Prague 2 (2) (Provod 49, Sima 79)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gozubuyuk (Ned)

Feb 25 - Manchester
Manchester United 0 (4)
Real Sociedad 0 (0)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Visser (Bel)

Feb 25 - Milan
Milan 1 (3)* (Kessie 9 pen)
Red Star Belgrade 1 (3) (Ben Nabouhane 24)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Jesus Gil (Esp)
**Milan win on away goals*

Feb 25 - Eindhoven
PSV 2 (4) (Zahavi 23, 44)
Olympiakos 1 (5) (Koka 88)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Turpin (Fra)

Feb 25 - Rome
Roma 3 (5) (Dzeko 23, Perez 74, Mayoral 90+1)
Sporting Braga 1 (1) (Cristante 87 og)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ekberg (Swe)

COPPA ITALIA 2020-21

Round of 16

Jan 12 - Milan
Milan 0*
Torino 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Valeri (Ita)
**Milan win 5-4 on penalties after extra-time*

Jan 13 - Florence
Fiorentina 1 (Kouame 57)
Internazionale 2 (Vidal 40 pen, Lukaku 119)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Massa (Ita) *After extra-time*

Jan 13 - Naples
Napoli 3 (Lorenzo 18, Lozano 38, Petagna 76)
Empoli 2 (Bajrami 33, 68)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Giua (Ita)

Jan 13 - Turin
Juventus 3 (Kulusevski 2, Morata 23, Rafia 104)
Genoa 2 (Czyborra 28, Melegoni 74)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Chiffi (Ita) *After extra-time*

Jan 14 - Sassuolo
Sassuolo 0
SPAL 2 (Missiroli 49, Dickmann 58)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Camplone (Ita)

Jan 14 - Bergamo
Atalanta 3 (Miranchuk 43, Muriel 61, Sutalo 64)
Cagliari 1 (Sottil 55)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Dionisi (Ita)

Jan 19 - Rome
Roma 0
Spezia 3
HT: N/A **Ref:** N/A

Jan 21 - Rome
Lazio 2 (Parolo 23, Colombi 90 og)
Parma 1 (Mihaila 83)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ayroldi (Ita)

Quarter-Finals

Jan 26 - Milan
Internazionale 2 (Lukaku 71 pen, Eriksen 90+7)
Milan 1 (Ibrahimovic 31)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Valeri (Ita)

Jan 27 - Bergamo
Atalanta 3 (Djimsiti 7, Malinovskyi 37, Miranchuk 57)
Lazio 2 (Muriqi 17, Acerbi 34)
HT: 2-2. **Ref:** Pairetto (Ita)

Jan 27 - Turin
Juventus 4 (Morata 16 pen, Frabotta 33, Kulusevski 78, Chiesa 90+4)
SPAL 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Pezzuto (Ita)

Jan 28 - Naples
Napoli 4 (Koulibaly 5, Lozano 20, Politano 30, Elmas 40)
Spezia 2 (Gyasi 70, Acampora 73)
HT: 4-0. **Ref:** Fourneau (Ita)

Semi-Finals - Leg 1

Feb 2 - Milan
Internazionale 1 (Martinez 9)
Juventus 2 (Cristiano Ronaldo 26 pen, 35)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Calvarese (Ita)

Feb 3 - Naples
Napoli 0
Atalanta 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Fabbri (Ita)

Semi-Finals - Leg 2

Feb 9 - Turin
Juventus 0 (2)
Internazionale 0 (1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Mariani (Ita)

Feb 10 - Bergamo
Atalanta 3 (3) (Zapata 10, Pessina 16, 78)
Napoli 1 (1) Lozano (53)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** La Penna (Ita)

Final

May 18
Atalanta
Juventus

SOUTH AMERICA

BRAZIL

Brazilian Serie A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Flamengo (C)	38	21	8	9	68	48	71
Internacional	38	20	10	8	61	35	70
Atletico Mineiro	38	20	8	10	64	45	68
Sao Paulo	38	18	12	8	59	41	66
Fluminense	38	18	10	10	55	42	64
Gremio	38	14	17	7	53	40	59
Palmeiras	38	15	13	10	51	37	58
Santos	38	14	12	12	52	51	54
Athletico Paranaense	38	15	8	15	38	36	53
Red Bull Bragantino	38	13	14	11	50	40	53
Ceara	38	14	10	14	54	51	52
Corinthians	38	13	12	13	45	45	51
Atletico Goianiense	38	12	14	12	40	45	50
Bahia	38	12	8	18	48	59	44
Sport	38	12	6	20	31	50	42
Fortaleza	38	10	11	17	34	44	41
Vasco da Gama (R)	38	10	11	17	37	56	41
Goias (R)	38	9	10	19	41	63	37
Coritiba (R)	38	7	10	21	31	54	31
Botafogo (R)	38	5	12	21	32	62	27

CHILE

Chilean Primera Division

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
U. Catolica (C)	34	18	11	5	65	35	65
Union La Calera	34	17	6	11	59	41	57
Universidad de Chile	34	13	13	8	49	33	52
Union Espanola	34	14	10	10	55	53	52
Palestino	34	14	9	11	49	45	51
Deportes Antofagasta	34	12	12	10	43	42	48
Cobresal	34	13	8	13	45	40	47
Huachipato	34	13	7	14	43	44	46
Curico Unido	34	13	7	14	40	52	46
O'Higgins	34	12	9	13	40	39	45
Santiago Wanderers	34	12	8	14	42	53	44
Everton	34	10	13	11	37	41	43
Audax Italiano	34	10	11	13	47	50	41
U. de Concepcion (R)	34	9	14	11	38	46	41
Deportes La Serena	34	10	9	15	34	41	39
Coco-Colo	34	9	12	13	33	43	39
Deportes Iquique (R)	34	9	11	14	38	46	38
Coquimbo Unido (R)	34	9	8	17	33	46	35

Relegation Play-Off

Feb 17 - Talca
Coco-Colo 1 (Solari 19)
Universidad de Concepcion 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chi)

WORLD

2020 CLUB WORLD CUP

Feb 4 - Al Rayyan
Tigres UANL 2 (Gignac 38, 45+5 pen)
Ulsan Hyundai 1 (Kim Ki-Hee 24)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Ostojich (Uru)

Feb 4 - Al Rayyan
Al Duhail 0
Al Ahly 1 (El Shahat 30)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Escobar (Gua)

Fifth Place Play-Off

Feb 7 - Al Rayyan
Ulsan Hyundai 1 (Bit-Garam 62)
Al Duhail 3 (Edmilson Junior 21, Muntari 66, Ali 82)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Edina Alves Batista (Bra)

Semi-Finals

Feb 7 - Al Rayyan
Palmeiras 0
Tigres UANL 1 (Gignac 54 pen)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Makkelie (Ned)

Feb 8 - Al Rayyan
Al Ahly 0
Bayern Munich 2 (Lewandowski 17, 86)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Abdulla Hassan Mohd (UAE)

Third Place Play-Off

Feb 11 - Al Rayyan
Al Ahly 0*
Palmeiras 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ndiaye (Sen)
**Al Ahly win 3-2 on penalties after extra-time*

Final

Feb 11 - Al Rayyan
Bayern Munich 1 (Pavard 59)
Tigres UANL 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ostojich (Uru)

Internationals

2022 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

EUROPE section

● *13 finals places available*

Matchdays 1-3 (March 24-31)

Group A
Portugal v Azerbaijan
Serbia v Rep. of Ireland
Serbia v Portugal
Rep. of Ireland v Luxembourg
Azerbaijan v Serbia
Luxembourg v Portugal

Group B
Spain v Greece
Sweden v Georgia
Georgia v Spain
Kosovo v Sweden
Greece v Georgia
Spain v Kosovo

Group C
Bulgaria v Switzerland
Italy v Northern Ireland
Bulgaria v Italy
Switzerland v Lithuania
Lithuania v Italy
Northern Ireland v Bulgaria

Group D
Finland v Bosnia-Herz.
France v Ukraine
Kazakhstan v France
Ukraine v Finland
Bosnia-Herz. v France
Ukraine v Kazakhstan

Group E
Estonia v Czech Republic
Belgium v Wales
Belarus v Estonia
Czech Republic v Belgium
Belgium v Belarus
Wales v Czech Republic

Group F
Israel v Denmark
Moldova v Faroe Islands
Scotland v Austria
Denmark v Moldova
Austria v Faroe Islands
Israel v Scotland
Austria v Denmark
Moldova v Israel
Scotland v Faroe Islands

Group G
Gibraltar v Norway
Latvia v Montenegro
Turkey v Netherlands
Montenegro v Gibraltar
Norway v Turkey
Netherlands v Latvia
Gibraltar v Netherlands
Montenegro v Norway
Turkey v Latvia

Group H
Cyprus v Slovakia
Malta v Russia
Slovenia v Croatia
Russia v Slovenia
Croatia v Cyprus
Slovakia v Malta
Croatia v Malta
Cyprus v Slovenia
Slovakia v Russia

Group I
Andorra v Albania
England v San Marino
Hungary v Poland
Albania v England
Poland v Andorra
San Marino v Hungary
Andorra v Hungary
England v Poland
San Marino v Albania

Group J
Germany v Iceland
Liechtenstein v Armenia
Romania v North Macedonia
Armenia v Iceland
North Macedonia v Liechtenstein
Romania v Germany
Armenia v Romania
Germany v North Macedonia
Liechtenstein v Iceland

SOUTH AMERICAN section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Matchday 5 (Mar 25-26)

Venezuela v Ecuador
Bolivia v Peru
Argentina v Uruguay
Chile v Paraguay
Colombia v Brazil

Matchday 6 (Mar 30)

Uruguay v Bolivia
Peru v Venezuela
Brazil v Argentina
Paraguay v Colombia
Ecuador v Chile

CONCACAF section

● *3.5 finals places available*

First Round - Window 1 (Mar 23-30)

Group A
Antigua & Barbuda v Montserrat
El Salvador v Grenada
US Virgin Islands v Antigua & Barbuda
Montserrat v El Salvador
Grenada v US Virgin Islands

Group B
Suriname v Cayman Islands
Canada v Bermuda
Aruba v Suriname
Cayman Islands v Canada
Bermuda v Aruba

Group C
Guatemala v Cuba
Curacao v St. Vincent & Grenadines
British Virgin Islands v Guatemala
Cuba v Curacao
St. Vincent & Grenadines v British Virgin Islands

Group D
Dominican Republic v Dominica
Panama v Barbados
Anguilla v Dominican Republic
Dominica v Panama
Barbados v Anguilla

Group E
Nicaragua v St. Lucia
Haiti v Belize
Turks & Caicos Islands v Nicaragua
St. Lucia v Haiti
Belize v Turks & Caicos Islands

Group F
St. Kitts & Nevis v Puerto Rico
Trinidad & Tobago v Guyana
Bahamas v St. Kitts & Nevis
Puerto Rico v Trinidad & Tobago
Guyana v Bahamas

2020 AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
Cameroon	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Burkina Faso	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Zimbabwe	3	0	0	3	1	5	0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
DR Congo	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Congo	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Niger	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Libya	3	0	2	1	1	2	2

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Rwanda	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Togo	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Uganda	3	0	1	2	3	7	1

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guinea	3	1	2	0	6	3	5
Zambia	3	1	2	0	3	1	5
Tanzania	3	1	1	1	3	4	4
Namibia	3	0	1	2	0	4	1

Quarter-Finals

Jan 30 - Yaounde
Mali 0*
Congo 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Waweru (Ken)
**Mali win 5-4 on penalties after extra-time*

Jan 30 - Douala
DR Congo 1 (Lilepo 21)
Cameroon 2 (N'Djeng 29, Oukine Tcheoude 41)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Maarouf Eid Mansour (Egy)

Jan 31 - Douala
Morocco 3 (Rahimi 1, Bemammer 8, El Kaabi 39 pen)
Zambia 1 (Phiri 80)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Ndabihawenimana (Bdi)

Jan 31 - Limbe
Guinea 1 (Sylla 60)
Rwanda 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Guezzaz (Mar)

Semi-Finals

Feb 3 - Douala
Mali 0*
Guinea 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** El Banna (Egy)
**Mali win 5-4 on penalties after extra-time*

Feb 3 - Limbe
Morocco 4 (Bouftini 28, Rahimi 40, 73, Bemammer 82)
Cameroon 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Ndala (Cod)

Third Place Final

Feb 6 - Douala
Guinea 2 (Sylla 9, Bangoura 45+1)
Cameroon 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Benbraham (Alg)

Final

Feb 7 - Yaounde
Mali 0
Morocco 2 (Bouftini 69, El Kaabi 79)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Waweru (Ken)

April 2021 *Vol. 61 No. 8*

GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Jamie Evans & Jared Tinslay

STAFF WRITER
Sam Straw

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

PICTURES
Pictures copyright: Getty Images

EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary,
Downs Court, Yalding Hill,
Yalding, Maidstone,
Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Talk Media Sales: David Lerpiniere
Tel: 01732 445325
Email: david.lerpiniere@talkmediasales.co.uk

CHIEF EXECUTIVE Steve Wright
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER Phil Weeden
MANAGING DIRECTOR Kevin McCormick
PUBLISHER Steve Brown
SUBS MARKETING DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
SENIOR SUBS MARKETING MANAGERS
Nicholas McIntosh & Rochelle Gyer-Smith
PRINT PRODUCTION MANAGER
Georgina Harris
PRINT PRODUCTION CONTROLLERS
Kelly Orriss & Hayley Brown

DISTRIBUTION
Great Britain: Marketforce
Tel: 0330 390 6555
Northern Ireland and the Republic Of Ireland
Newspread Tel: +353 23 886 3850

PRINTING
William Gibbons & Sons Ltd

SUBSCRIPTIONS ORDER HOTLINE
+44 (0)1959 543 747
Lines open Mon-Fri, 8am-5.30pm

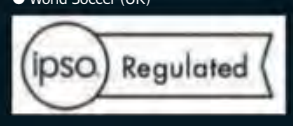
or visit shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC

SUBSCRIPTIONS RATES
Full annual subscription rate (13 issues)
UK: £77.87, USA & EU: £91, RoW: £98.

CONTACT US
Editorial: wos.ed@kelsey.co.uk
UK subscription & back issue orderline:
01959 543 747
Overseas subscription orderline:
0044 (0) 1959 543 747
Toll free USA subscription orderline:
1-888-777-0275
Customer service website:
help.kelsey.co.uk/support/home
Customer service & subscription postal address:
World Soccer Customer Service Team
Kelsey Publishing Ltd, The Granary,
Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding,
Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

WorldSoccer is a member of

● A Bola (Portugal) ● De Telegraaf (Netherlands)
● ElfVoetbal (Netherlands) ● Fanatik (Turkey)
● Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany)
● La Gazzetta dello Sport (Italy)
● Kicker (Germany) ● Marca (Spain)
● Nemzeti Sport (Hungary) ● Sport-Express (Russia)
● Sport/Foot (Belgium) ● TIPS Bladet (Denmark)
● World Soccer (UK)



Stunning...a general view of the stadium

AZADI STADIUM

Location: Tehran, Iran
Teams: Esteghlal and Persepolis
Built: 1971
Capacity: 78,116

Originally built to serve as the centrepiece venue for the 1974 Asian Games, the Azadi Stadium remains the biggest stadium in Iran.

According to a poll by *Goal.com*, it is also the most intimidating stadium in Asia, partly due to the stadium's unique design – which helps amplify crowd noise across the pitch – and partly as a result of the intense rivalry that it hosts. Esteghlal and Persepolis, Iran's most successful clubs, both play their home games at the Azadi Stadium, as does the Iran national team. In 1997, a record 128,000 crowd watched on as the home side drew 1-1 with Australia in a World Cup qualifier, eventually going on to qualify for France '98 by virtue of away goals. Since then, the capacity has been gradually reduced down to 78,116, but it remains a daunting proposition for any visiting side.

Situated in west Tehran, the ground was originally named the Aryamehr Stadium and is commonly referred to as a "bee swarm" due to the loud sound of vuvuzelas – a soundtrack that became so familiar during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Derby Day...a view from the stands during Esteghlal v Persepolis

Divided...fans of Persepolis (L) and Esteghlal (R) during the Tehran derby

History... women are allowed to attend Iran's World Cup qualifier against Cambodia

GREATEST GAMES

1997 November 22 Iran 1-1 Australia

128,000 fans were in attendance to witness the first leg of Iran's AFC-OFC 1998 World Cup qualification play-off versus Australia. Ex-Leeds United and Liverpool winger Harry Kewell gave Australia an early lead, but Khodadad Azizi equalised before half-time. After the second leg finished 2-2, Iran qualified for their first World Cup since 1978 on away goals.

2000 December 29 Persepolis 2-2 Esteghlal

Possibly the most chaotic clash in the derby's history; in his first game since controversially moving between the two sides, Esteghlal defender Mehdi Hasheminasab scored late on to give his new team a 2-1 lead, only for Persepolis to equalise two minutes later. At full-time, tensions spilled over – fighting broke out on the pitch, fans destroyed 250 city buses, and 60 people were arrested – including three players from each side.

2019 October 10 Iran 14-0 Cambodia

Iran thrashed Cambodia 14-0 in their first home qualifier for the 2022 World Cup, on the day that women were officially allowed into the Azadi for the first time in 40 years. It was the first time women were allowed to buy tickets on general sale, but they were still restricted to their own section.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 16

SUBSCRIBE TO

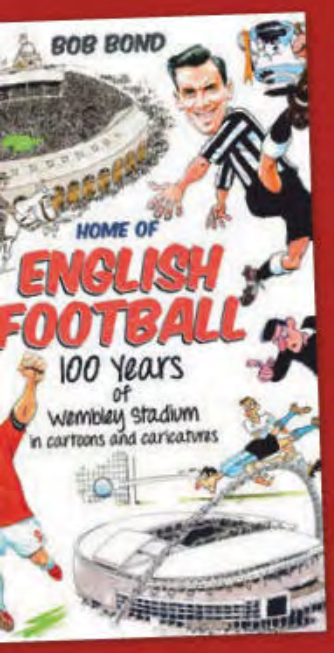
WorldSoccer

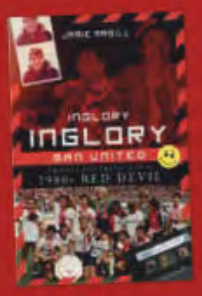
Pay just £15 for your first 6 issues*

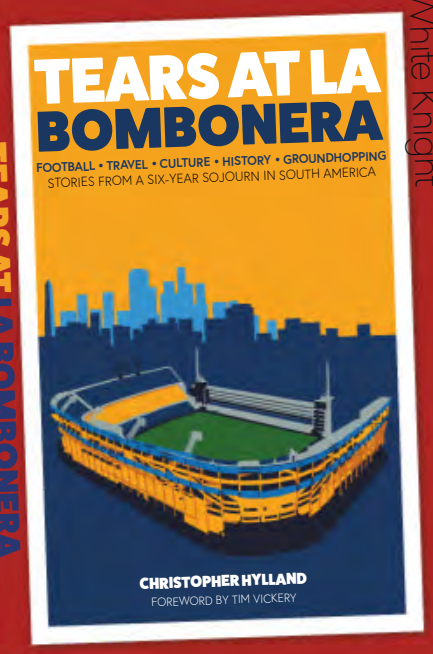
Subscribe online at
shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC421 or call 01959 543 747 quote code WSC421

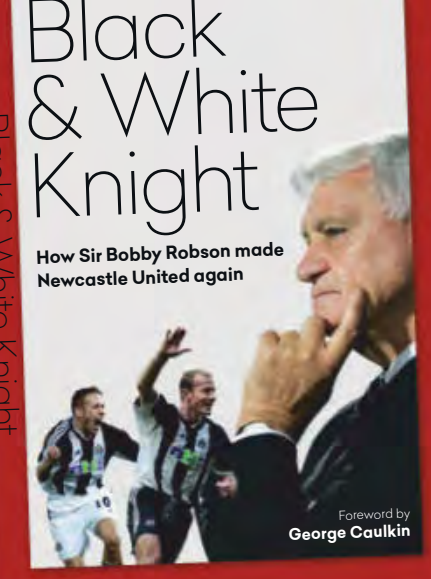
Calls charged at your standard network rate. Lines are open 8am-5.30pm Monday to Friday.

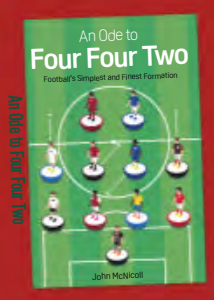
*Terms and conditions: Offer available for UK Direct Debit customers only. You will pay £15 for your first 6 issues. Your subscription will then continue every 6 months at the rate of £26.99 – still saving 25%. For overseas rates please visit shop.kelsey.co.uk/WSC. Offer closes April 30, 2021. Full UK subscription rate for 13 issues is £77.87, USA & EU £91, RoW £98. Here at Kelsey Publishing we take your privacy seriously and will only use your personal information to administer your account and to provide the products and services you have requested from us. We will only contact you about our special offers via the preferences you have indicated, and you can update these at any time by emailing us at cs@kelsey.co.uk or by calling us on 01959 543 747.



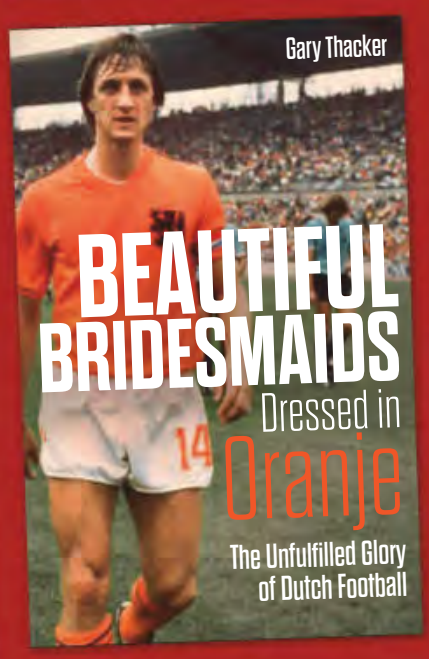
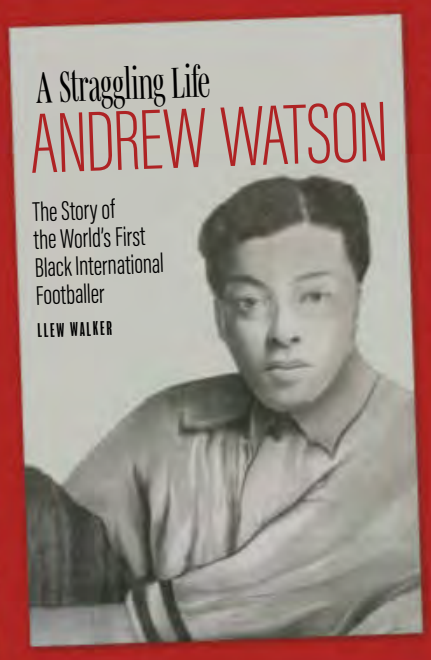
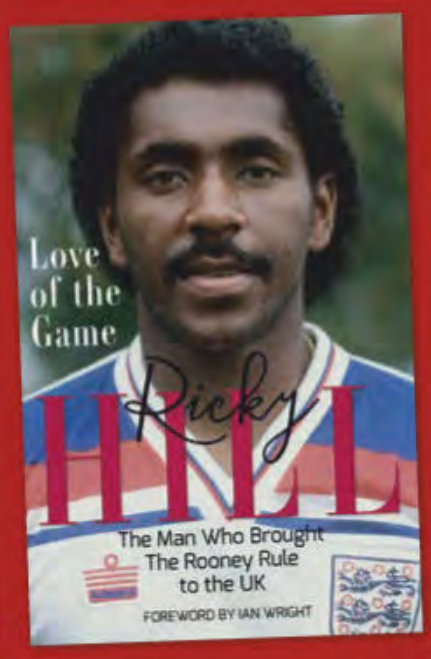
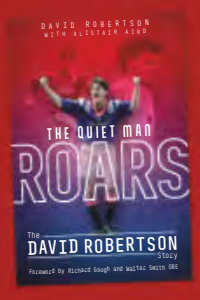
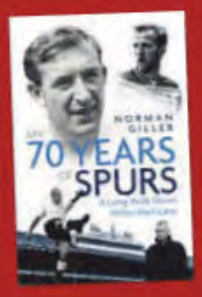
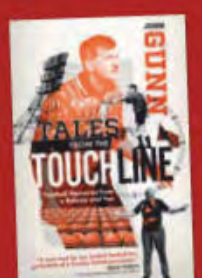








EVEN MORE TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2021

pitch

www.pitchpublishing.co.uk